SHACKLED SOULS

ELENORE MEHERIN

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BY

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"CHICKIE,"
"CHICKIE, A SEQUEL,"
"THE ROAD TO LOVE,"
"SANDY," "NORA LEE,"
"JERRY," ETC.

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SHACKLED SOULS

CHAPTER I

THEY stared through a knot hole into the dance hall. As they looked they exchanged rapid comments, their voices husky with excitement. Especially the girl's. In the shadow her face shone with a beautiful eagerness.

They edged closer, their cheeks touching. An odd, provocative pair—a girl of 18 and a boy of 10.

Suddenly the girl caught her companion in a quick, vigorous hug: "Jackie, look up! A million stars. Count them. Count every blessed one!"

His eyes obediently searched the Milky Way; the girl seized a long, lingering glance at the dancers moving in dreamy rhythm.

She found what she sought—a tall, clean-limbed youth with a mop of fine black curls and lips merrily parted. How winsome this made his eyes! What was he saying to his partner? What does a man say that makes a girl's cheek turn pink with pleasure? The peeker at the knot hole drew a long wistful sigh and heard Jackie's solemn: "You'd like to be in there, wouldn't you, Ron?"

She chuckled gaily and, putting her arms about his shoulder, they went skipping off down a sandy road through trees.

Every few minutes they said to each other: "Look!" and

stopped to wish on a flying star, to watch a flowery drifting cloud or listen to the pines murmuring their liquid song.

It was 1911 and vacation time in the green California hills. These two had never been in the country before.

The cloistered dark, the lovely intimacy of the trees, the dim voice of the river haunted their spirits with a sense of living poetry, awakening in the girl longings, dreams, tenderness. Oh what a rapture, what mystery and beauty is Life! She hungered for it.

The narrow white path twisted through water willows. They saw the cool, oily gleam of the river and above this, hanging like a lighted lantern in the trees, was the cottage.

The little boy's steps began to lag. He gazed wishfully to the water. "Gosh, don't it look black! Gosh, wouldn't it be fun to go for a row! Why don't we?"

The girl, too, looked downward dreamily. But she pretended not to hear.

He took a loud, resigned breath. "Guess you won't, will you? Gonna make me go to bed, Ronnie?" The boy's lips and eyes assumed an appealing look that made the girl sweep him to her with a throaty: "You darling! Don't make a fuss, Jackie lad. Dearie's asleep."

"Well, can I read some?"

She nodded. They entered a great oblong room with raftered ceiling and a huge stone fireplace where an immense log now slowly burned. The flame light and a candle in a small copper niche gave a dim, warm radiance to the crudely furnished room. The redwood panels shone like satin. Here and there splashes of color came out glowingly—a pair of

green ginger jars, an old blue plaque, a battered mother-of-pearl table.

The girl put a finger to her lips, motioning to the couch where a golden-haired woman lay sleeping.

The boy pulled her down, almost choking her with his small, tight arms about her neck. "Bet you're going back to the river. Bet you are, all right!"

She laughed softly, whispering: "Tomorrow we'll go rowing in the dark."

He dawdled regretfully to bed, swinging his shoe by the lacing.

The girl paused a moment at the couch, gently touching the sleeper's soft, bright hair. "No wonder he loved her," she thought absently.

Then she put out the candle and stole back down the white path to the river. There was a bench under a towering redwood. She leaned here happily against the mighty tree, lost in the dreaming dark, the loneliness and beauty. Oh, the undreamed-of music in the splash of little waves on the beach, the tender softness of the starry night.

For years and years, ever since she could remember, Roen Ross had imagined such holy, poetic scenes as this. Now, at 18, for the first time she looked upon a river, upon a giant redwood tree, upon a lofty mountain peak. She was stirred to her innermost spirit. She was quiveringly alive. She wished to laugh. And often she could have wept.

Even as a child Roen had these deep, ardent emotions. And these, because of the peculiar circumstances of her very young years, had been almost cruelly developed. There were memories cut like cameos in Roen's thought.

One was of a woman in a flowered challis wrapper—an appealing woman with lowered head and curls brightly gold straying at her neck. She stood at a door, luring and expectant. A man who was very gay leaned down and kissed the curls. This was what the woman wanted. She smiled softly. They were very happy.

After a while the woman no longer waited on the threshold. The man no longer laughed. This picture gave place to another. The woman lay on a couch, the man knelt with his arms flung around her waist. Now when he kissed her neck he hid his face there. Tears rushed to his eyes. He wanted her so, and he feared he was going to lose her.

Roen, who was just 8, used to watch. These two beings moved in a shadowy, mysterious charm. They were Dearie and Bobby-dad, her mother and father. She wondered about them and worshiped.

One day she came from school. A big, fat-faced woman opened the kitchen door and said: "Shshsh!" Then she stooped down, her corsets creaking, and whispered: "You have a little brother."

Roen stood perfectly still while these words went tinkling like Christmas bells in her thought.

This was the gladdest of the memories. They had the little brother.

Afterwards Dearie used to lie on the couch. Her hands were white and thin. But she was awfully proud. And liked it when Bobby-dad hid his face in her palms, when he said as though his heart were breaking, "Oh my dearest, dearest."

Roen held herself very tight when she came upon them so.

She would move softly into the gay, amber shadows about the old chintz drapes. Her heart grew large. She loved them both terribly—so much more than they guessed, with the silence and yearning of childhood.

It was only a small house where they lived—Oak street across from the park in San Francisco. But they could see the eucalyptus trees bowing to the wind. That was always so nice. And in the living room they had two wondrous pictures that an artist friend had painted. One was called "Morning Sight." It showed fishermen putting out to a misty lavender sea.

In this room, too, were the rich old chintzes. And always a flower in the vase.

Ever since Jackie was born they ate here. They pushed the table to Dearie's couch.

Roen picked nasturtiums on big, splashy stems. This was the way Dearie liked them. When the table was set, she would say, "Bring me purple pansies," and she would tuck these in the bright hair and look pale and thrilling as an angel for Bobby-dad. Roen waited for the warm, adoring flush to deepen her father's eyes. Young as she was, she felt a radiant sweetness. There grew, subconsciously in her thought, the dream of great, unselfish love.

One day, when she was 13, everything changed. Maggie, the fat-faced, came to her, walking mysteriously, "Your father wants you. Now—whatever you do, don't cry!"

This was the sharpest of her memories cut deep in incomprehensible pain.

Her father had been in bed a week. They said he had a

cold. Roen had not been allowed to see him. Once she had stolen to his door and had been frightened by the loud, grating sound of his breathing.

She followed Maggie reluctantly. They tiptoed across the living room where Dearie lay face downward, her hands clawing the pillow.

Seeing this, Roen hung back. She swallowed and wanted to run away. She was pushed into Bobby-dad's room.

He was sitting up, propped with pillows. She could have painted the wonderful, kind, wistful look in his eyes when he saw her. As long as she lived she could hear his hoarse, gasping voice. Yet he was smiling.

He said: "Ronnie-lass, your dad's got to go away. There, lassie, don't cry—please. Promise me, will you look after Dearie? No one but you to watch them. Think you can grow up quickly? Take care of Dearie and your brother?"

She looked down at him and twisted her hand, trying mightily to swallow all the tears. She kept nodding her head up and down. But suddenly she buried her face against his shoulder, pleading, "Bobby-dad, don't die! Oh please, you won't die!"

It happened that she looked full in his face just then . . . full in his eyes. All their gay, teasing laughter was gone. They darted about like little animals terribly scared.

She forgot her own fright. She said: "Oh, you're not afraid, are you. Don't you be frightened. I'm here, Bobby-dad. I won't run away. I'll stay right here. You see me—you do see me—"

She began to pray with all her might, hiding her head in his pillows. She thought God heard because after a while her father slept.

But that was the last time Bobby-dad spoke. In the morning he was dead . . . the gay, adored father gone, leaving his great shining trust to her—to a little girl, just 13.

Five years she kept it. They were years of struggle and isolation. But she had his joyous spirit and took stoutly, without noting them, blows that would make adults weep.

She couldn't fail, of course. Because those two he had left were the very breath of her life. She could no more separate them from the thought of herself than she could be freed from her own pulse.

Yet these nights—young summer nights, sitting here lost in the dreaming dark, she felt uneasy and restless as though a voice she was awaiting, called. As though a hand were pulling.

She stood now and leaned against the tree. Notes of distant music fluttered down the stream. There stole over her a sweet, pervading sadness—a yearning to lose herself in the beauty she felt so poignantly about her.

A moon of tawny gold swept upward and was tangled in the redwoods. It put a lambence on the water, a soft, undulant fire such as she had never seen before.

She reached out her hands and murmured softly: "Oh!" She wiped tears from her eyes.

And turning suddenly came face to face with the blue-eyed youth she had peeked upon in the dance hall.

CHAPTER II

In the first glimpse when the blue, bonny eyes met hers, he seemed a being conjured from the music of the soft summer night—young, sweet, laughing. More winning even than when she peeked upon him these seven nights through the knot hole.

Now she was abashed, knowing he had seen her tears. As he stood there blocking the narrow path, she said hurriedly: "Oh, did you see the moon come up that way?"

"Why yes," he answered, surprised and pleased that she spoke. He noted the dark eyes, the beautiful eagerness of her strong, sweet mouth. He always looked first in a girl's eyes, then at her lips. If he liked these, he looked a long while. For he was a blithe young troubadour. "I saw the moon. Did you think it finer than other nights?"

She nodded dreamily: "It seemed blooming in the trees. I never saw it so big and burnished before. You see," she added, giving a frank, singing laugh, "I've never been in the country before. I've not seen a river till now."

"Never saw a RIVER! Good Lord, you don't happen to be Miranda, do you?"

She chuckled gaily: "Why no! I just have traveled where rivers don't flow."

The breeze caught her flying chestnut hair. She passed with a chiming "Well—good night!"

Under the chuckling laugh he felt her wistful yearning. He stared after her, fascinated. What manner of woodland goddess was this who never saw a river before, yet wept because of poignant splendor in the moon shining through trees?

He was deeply touched, for he was Michael Scott—Celt and poet, melancholy and gay by turns, quick to laugh and quick to weep, but whatever his mood mightily enjoying it. "Ah," he thought, "poor darling!" And remembered the girl had wondrous eyes.

Roen went quickly, a little breathless and excited, to the porch where she and Jackie slept. Through the tall, spired trees she watched the stars and far off on the highest peak a gauzy sapling etching itself with delicate ardor on the pale breast of the sky. All about her in the rhythmic dark pulsed the still, deep joy of the night.

How wondrous to be here—a mute, eager breath of it—to reach out to hills and skies. She closed her eyes and flushed, recalling the youth's blue, joyous gaze and that it dwelt warmly on her face. How odd it was, coming upon him so. And sweet—intensely sweet.

This whole day had been the very happiest. For instance, when she was getting the dinner, Dearie suddenly said: "Ah, Ronnie—what a blessing you are—what would life be without you!" Said this and smiled thrillingly the way she used to long ago for Bobby-dad. Roen trembled thinking: "Oh, she's getting better—surely!"

Five years Roen had awaited the hour when her mother would put away her grief, when she would let in the sun and joy of life again.

In those first desolate months after Bobby-dad's death, the

little girl tried pathetically to cheer her mother. She would come in carrying the little boy. She would set him down, dressed up in Dearie's long skirt with the bustle, her feathered hat. She would whisper to him. And he would prance up and down, jouncing the bustle, grinning impishly. "Look at him," Roen would demand. "Isn't he adorable? Smile, Dearie, please!"

But Dearie sat with her pretty lace handkerchiefs pressed against her eyes. Every day she had long crying spells.

After Maggie left it was much worse. Then Roen had all the work to do. She lost six months at school. Aunt Carrie, who was Robert's sister, said it was a mortal shame. She said: "Your mother could pull herself together if she wanted!" And she went on a rampage when she found that all the insurance money was gone and Dearie had mortgaged the cottage.

Half of the $5000 Dearie used for Bobby-dad's funeral. She would have nothing but the finest and a great marble vault. "Your father," said the aunt grimly, "would find the education of his children a more fitting monument."

Roen, who was then 16, heard this treason with blistering heart. She looked at her aunt's hard shut lips. And hated her.

To her, Dearie was still that lovely woman standing at the door waiting for the man who was so gay to stoop and kiss her curls. It was a joy to serve her. She assumed greedily all responsibility for her little brother. She spoilt and trained and worshiped him.

And she raced through school, accepting quite naturally the necessity of earning before the last cent of their meager funds was gone.

Now, at 18, she lay with soft, young arms clasped under her head. She watched stars jeweling the still forest night. And felt her whole being thrilling to the piercing wonder that is life.

Three or four days passed. She avoided the knot hole and the white path to the river. Yet whenever she came suddenly around a leafy bend in the road she was conscious of a tremulous expectance. He might suddenly appear.

One afternoon she and Jackie were running along the sands. They had been in the water an hour. A breeze came up. Now they went flying with chilled, eager feet to that last patch of sunlight—stretch out there and get warm a moment before the day was done.

Abruptly Jackie stopped. He began waving his arms and shouting stridently: "Hey—oh, hey there, Mike! Gee! can't yer hear!" and beckoning wildly to a man in a small motor boat. Roen stared. Across the water came an answering laugh. The boatman steered toward them. He was bareheaded, black curls flying in the breeze. He brought his boat chugging to their feet.

"Hello, partner!" he called merrily.

Jackie twisted his face in the most outlandish scowls: "Ask her, now—gee, now yer got a chance!"

The blue-eyed youth came grinning to Roen's side. She was greatly amazed.

"I," said Michael Scott, "and my fishing partner of the morning would like to chug you to the ocean in the morning. May we?"

Jackie, watching his sister fearfully and seeing her wide, startled eyes, broke in hurriedly: "Please—you'll let us go?

I didn't tell you, Ronnie, 'cause Mike wanted to. Say yes! Please."

Roen looked from one eager face to the other and blushed and burst out laughing.

Michael took courage. "When the moon didn't bring you out, I thought the little brother would. Please come." He stood before her, sunlight in his eyes and on the sparkling mouth.

"It must be fun," she murmured eagerly.

"Oh, it's joyous, and for one who's not seen much of rivers, it's a liberal education."

She chuckled merrily and, but for the stranger, would have swooped on Jackie with a hug of joy. Imagine such a golden opportunity!

At 10 o'clock that memorable day they came hurrying down the path. "We're here," Jackie shouted. "And we've got a swell cake that's just out of the oven—gosh!"

Roen, excited, flushing, scarcely saw Michael's outstretched hand. She stepped in lightly, the breeze blowing her full white skirt and the poppies on her leghorn hat. Her eyes glanced about, strewing smiles happily.

Now and then they stole to the stern, where Michael steered. There was breeze and gaiety and a great sweetness in his look. Roen thought him wondrous handsome.

"Look," he said, "now watch him." A king fisher poised still as a leaf on the edge of the tree. Suddenly it made a dive into the water.

"Did he catch him?" Jackie whispered, staring tensely. "Gee! He did!"

And the two who had seen few of the wonders of life were

thrilled by this and by the pouch-necked pelicans out fishing. Then by the widening of the stream, the swift flying current and those arches of stone the waters had carved for themselves at the river's mouth.

Michael told all manner of yarns. When he ran out of truth he filled in as he liked. When they passed the Indian's island, he made the tale haunting. "You know," he said, "he loved the girl so much he brought her back from death. She was swimming down by a dangerous cliff early one dawn. And whether she wanted to die or the tide got too strong, no one knows. But they found her body floating on the water.

"And this Indian who'd kept on searching after everyone else gave up, wouldn't accept her death. He worked over her without one moment's rest for sixteen hours and he brought her back to life. Sure as my name is Michael Scott, I'd like to be loved like that."

"The girl married him?" asked Roen eagerly.

Michael shrugged. "I don't think so," said he, suddenly brooding and melancholy. "For it isn't the way of a woman to marry the right man." He gazed pensively to the shore, and without a word drew the boat to the sand.

"Has he loved already?" thought Roen sharply. "Has he loved and lost?"

As he helped her out she stole a swift glance at his face, not knowing that her eyes were filled with gentle eagerness.

He caught the look and answered it with a gay, guilty flush. He was tempted to say: "No! My heart's not broken." But he liked too well that gentle pity.

"Gather up the brush, Jackie," he ordered, "and we'll cook the lunch."

He kneeled on the beach and made a cosy fire and fried steaks. "Come and see if they're done to a turn," said he to Roen. When she knelt beside him, he asked quickly: "Why didn't you come the next evening?"

"Did you expect me?" she evaded. "Did you think I had a habit of weeping in the moonlight?"

"I hoped so. Finally I found out that Jackie belonged to you. He told me more than the moon could."

"You had no right to pump him."

"Yes, I did. He thought I was an old friend of yours. You didn't deny me to him, did you?"

"Well, no; I couldn't make you out a liar and then come riding to the ocean with you."

"And you did want to come with me?" said he, delighted. "Odd that I found you that night. I didn't know whether you were real or a woodland nymph. You seemed enchanted. Did you think of me afterward? I looked for you all the next day."

She leaned over the fire, fearing that her face flushed, having never heard words so sweet.

"Did you think of me?" he repeated.

"Yes."

Noting the sudden pause, Jackie now came and planted himself between them. His eyes crinkled in his freckled cheeks. "Gee, Mike," he offered, cutting a juicy steak, "we were lucky to meet you, all right. You bet we were!"

Roen, looking toward the blue Pacific, laughed softly. Her hair blew in sunny ringlets about her face. She turned it upward and let the spray dash against it.

Michael watched her. He liked the dark eyes, the strong,

sweet sculpture of her throat and chin. He liked the quick, warm way her arm went hugging about her brother.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asked finally when, sunburned, tired and happy, they climbed to the sands at home.

"Oh, did we!" she answered, closing her eyes. "It was lovely in you. Michael—Scott!" The last name rushed in after a panicky pause.

He laughed and mocked her. "I like being lovely to you, Roen—Ross!"

"I'm blushing," she admitted, and grinned, knowing that the color was a red fire in her cheeks. And suddenly, looking upward, their young eyes tangled in a long, warm fervor that as long as she lived remained for Roen a thing holy and most sweet.

CHAPTER III

Now when they came round that leafy bend in the road or ran down to the river she waited for Jackie to tug her arm with an excited "There he is! Look, Ronnie, he's waving."

And Roen, feeling the scarlet fire in her cheeks, and her heart bounding, would glance out carelessly. Michael, bare headed, sparkling, steered the boat toward them.

He would reach out a hand and say: "Come, the minnows are flashing like a thousand silver arrows in the pool. You've not seen that, Jackie. Take a ride—please—"

When Roen's hand touched his, he stooped with a half teasing "Hello, Roen," so that she was forced to glance upward, blushing and meet the bonny blue of his eyes.

She could not avoid quick, furtive glances at his profile. Nearly always he caught her and flushed as she did and glanced back happily.

He taught them the crawl and showed Jackie a peach of a swan dive that he did most beautifully himself.

Then they lay in the sun and talked. He told them remarkable tales that made Jackie double up with laughter, that made him say a dozen times: "Gee, you're an awful funny fellow, Mike!"

Roen wasn't quite sure whether he told the truth or spun them yarns for the love of it. But she listened, inwardly thrilled—waiting for the blue, wistful eyes to glance upward,

laughing into hers. He had been across the seas many times. There was color and poetry and fantastic pathos in his talk.

Like when he told of his mother and how he chanced to be born here on the westernmost edge of the world instead of by Killarney Lakes.

"Oh, Michael, you don't mean all that?" said Roen eagerly, wishing because of the tenderness to run her hand through his soft black curls.

"Yes—all of it!" said he, nodding sadly and laughing.

"Then where are your Irish brothers, if you have four of them?"

"In Oxford, all except the oldest, and he's married."

"Are they handsome?"

"They look like me!"

"And is it true, really, about the fairies?" Jackie implored. "Not really true?"

Of course! No need to laugh at that. Fairies are real in Ireland. He had seen many a one. He said his mother was so beautiful the fairies were jealous of her. She and his father went traveling. They visited Berkeley. Here, before he was expected, Michael was born, and the sweet mother, whom of course he couldn't remember, passed quietly away.

So they left the baby with her sister and the father went home mourning and died.

"So you never saw either, Michael? Are you glad you were born here?"

He kept looking down and grinning. Suddenly he reached over and poured a handful of sand in her palm. "Yes," he said softly. "Very glad. If you'll come out and look at the moon with me tonight, Roen, please—"

Every day as she was leaving he asked this. She would never promise, though she longed to.

He said: "I'll wait for you anyhow. Think how lonely I'll be, Roen—"

And she did think of this. She fancied him standing down there by the redwood tree. Whenever she went he came so gladly to meet her. He put his arm lightly about her waist and asked her a thousand questions as they walked by the water. What did she think of this and that? Had she ever loved? Did she like her job? What kind of books did she read? How did she get through school so quickly?

She wondered, breathless: "What does he find to like in me? Why does he look with his eyes all kindling?"

They kindled because he loved the flying color of her hair, her dark eyes and brave, sweet mouth. He thought: "Can it be? Is she telling the truth? She's never loved? And no one has loved or kissed her? NO ONE?"

They found it enchanting to speculate about each other. He remembered bits that Jackie told him. Roen had to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to study and put the house in order and do things for Dearie before school. There was never any time left for play. "Ah, the brave darling!" thought Michael, looking down and smiling more tenderly than she could bear.

Once they walked near the dance pavilion. It was very dark. Not a star. No moon. The strains of the music came to them.

"Dance with me, colleen," said Michael, sweeping an arm about her.

"Oh, I can't. I've not learned the new steps, Michael."

"You can! Follow me. There, drag your feet a little. Listen." He began to sing in a soft, rich tenor that drew ter-

ribly on all the chords of her heart. "You like it—fine?" His lips were near to her cheek and smiling.

He moved so joyously she felt herself flowing in music. They swayed back and forth over the pebbly dirt, their feet winged, their hearts thumping.

He said: "You like to dance with me, Roen?"

"Yes," she answered, trembling, and dared not raise her eyes.

* * * * * * *

The vacation month was drawing to a close.

Only two days more for Michael. He was going down to Berkeley. He had four more years before him in college for he meant to be an engineer. He was one with great, flowing expectations—one who would win much from life.

He said: "Get up at dawn tomorrow, Jackie!" But looked at Roen, "For we've only two days."

They were very silent. He let Jackie steer the boat. He made him a present of his fishing tackle.

He said to Roen when they went out of the water: "Will you miss me?"

"Why—I can't say how much!"

He smiled and looked with boyish sweetness in her eyes: "It was lucky we met. Don't you think so? Come down early tonight. . . ."

She tucked Jackie in bed and, stooping down, kissed his short, freckled nose.

She ran her fingers through his tangled hair hoping he wouldn't note her yearning gaiety.

He watched her jealously: "Going down with Mike? Going for a row?"

She pressed her lips to his ears: "No! Just for a walk. Just to see the moon coming up. You don't care about that, Jackie-lad? All right with you if I say good-bye to Michael?"

"Honest, you're not going off somewheres in the boat? Gee, I think that'd be pretty mean!" He settled down resolutely, pulling from under the pillow a much-tattered "Nick Carter," which Roen pretended not to see.

"Of course, you got a right to go rowing if you want to. But, just the same, seeing as I'm the one that found Mike for us, I think it's pretty mean if you sneak off and have fun without me."

His half-washed, neat little hands were holding tightly to the pages; his short nose sniffing in stern dignity of judgment.

Roen laughed and gulped and pressed her cheek to his. "Just for a walk, Jackie-lad. Across my heart to die!"

She went tip-toeing down the porch to the grove of redwoods. Romance and the sweet, tremulous joy that is youth went with her. She stepped along quickly, listening to the music of wind in the trees. She laughed softly and put out her hand.

Michael sprang from the bench. "Ah what kept you so long? I thought I was forgotten."

"How foolish you are! You'd make a wonderful actor, Michael; you're such a great pretender."

"It seemed a long time," answered he moodily. "Leave your hand as it is. 'Tis well enough in mine. We'll go down to the pool where the trees are drowned in the water."

They entered a narrow path where the willows grew thickly, shutting them away in darkness and solitude.

"How wonderful," thought Roen, closing her eyes and following blindly.

"Ah, her sweet, soft hand," thought Michael, and pressed it gently. He liked to see her eyes close. It made the blood warm about his heart. He thought he would stoop down swiftly and kiss her lids. No one had done this dear thing to her before. . . .

They stood near the great, flat rock above the pool. They stared at the trees imaged and lost in the water.

He felt melancholy because he was bidding good-bye to youth. He was crossing a great threshold. And he would rather have loitered. Stay up here with the beauty and freedom and gladness.

But he was 19 and had lagged enough. Here was this girl. She'd beaten him by two years. She was already a toiler—strong, dear thing—so sweet.

"I'm a laggard," he now said darkly. "And you are out in the world already."

"But you've traveled, Michael. You've been to Paris and Rome and where the river Shannon flows. But I've only been these seventy miles from home in all my years."

When he heard this wistful note that crept so often to her voice, he was drawn to her with an aching pity. Imagine a girl like her and never been to a dance.

Jackie told him of Teddy Norris, the boy who wrote letters to Roen. He told of the farewell party of Roen's class at high school.

"Roen was just dying to get there. She made a dress out of some old blue thing of Dearie's. But after it got finished—gee, it looked funny.

"Gosh, Mike, we laughed and laughed. Ronnie laughed till she cried. Then she took it off and said, 'Thank heaven bustles and such are out of date!' and threw it back in the rag bag. We all made fudge in the kitchen that night instead."

He thought of this now and tucked her hand in his and looked with the warm fervor that half frightened her.

"What are you thinking of, Michael?"

"Of the sweetest and bravest thing in the world, Roeny. Of you!"

"Who can believe you, Michael? Since you come from the Lakes of Killarney."

"No, I don't come from there. And you believe me. Ah, I was the loneliest fellow on earth before I met you."

She gave her frank, singing laugh. "Indeed you were not! I watched you, my poor, sad Michael, for seven nights. You laughed more than anyone else and all the girls smiled at you."

"Where did you watch me?"

"Through the knot hole. Jackie and I found a knot hole in the pavilion and we peeked through it. We had lots of fun."

He had a sudden picture of the two of them laughing and crouching at the knot hole. He gazed down at her astonished. "I guess you were the loneliest fellow on earth, Roen—you, and not I."

"No," she denied softly. "I had the moon and the trees."

"But they made you cry."

"Beauty always does that, if you feel it deeply. Like now, Michael—look." A flock of birds winged sharply upward, and far down the river came notes of song.

"Do you know why beauty makes you weep, Roen? Because it fills you with longing. It gives you a dream of fine,

holy things that you want with all your heart. It draws on you and calls to you.

"The way you call to me, Roen." He stooped down and laughed gently, and suddenly, with an eager, pleading sound, took both her hands and drew her to him and kissed lightly her sweet, astonished lips.

CHAPTER IV

Her hands lay quiet in his. She said, "Oh, Michael, did you mean that?"

Something sweet and pleading in his face caught her with rapture. She reached up and touched his cheek. "You did? Dear Michael, you did?"

They looked at each other eagerly, their eyes full of tears.

His lips touched to her innermost spirit. She murmured with brimming heart, "I love you."

* * * * * * *

That night she didn't sleep.

She watched the young tree etching itself so delicate and trusting on the cold breast of the sky. The night that had made her weep because of its piercing splendor now moved with a sacred exaltation.

She felt Michael's hands, and oh, the beauty of his face bending down to hers!

She was a being moving in a dream—one who walked in a starlit forest, Galahad at her side.

She wished to lie awake recalling this sweetness. She wished her life would pause eternally in this moment so incredibly rapt and holy.

Yet she could scarcely wait for the morning—see him once again. She felt tremulous, ready to laugh or cry. She caught

Jackie to her with suffocating tenderness. She said, "This is Michael's last day, Jackie—the very last."

He waited on the beach, impatiently, breeze and sunlight playing with the dark curls. He came toward her, his head down. . . .

Suddenly he lifted it, whispering softly, "Roen," forcing her to glance upward in his joyous, gentle eyes.

He busied Jackie with the steering. Then he said: "What do you think of me, Roen?"

"Ah—don't ask me, Michael."

"I must know. Asthore."

"What name is that?"

"The sweetest name in all the world, Roen Asthore!

"Do you know what I wondered last night, Roen? I wondered what would have happened if another and not I, chanced down that path in the moon—another man and another moon."

"You can say that, Michael?"

"Suppose, though—"

"Well, if he had bluer eyes and blacker hair and a gayer smile. If he were you and more you, Michael. . . ."

"Come down early tonight, Roen—earlier than last night. I have things to say—"

She went about radiantly disturbed. She wondered if she wished to hear these things.

Did Michael love her? Was this what he wished to say? But she could not marry him—not yet—not for ever so long. . . .

Not till Dearie was well and Jackie grown.

* * * * * * *

They walked up to the hills. They saw the last flames of the

sun sinking in a great crimson cauldron to the waters. They held each other's hand. He said softly: "Roen, does it seem to you as though we've known each other a long time?"

"Always."

"It seems that way to me, too. Not as though you were a stranger. Even that first night I felt near to you. How did you feel to me?"

"Oh, like that, Michael."

"Yes—I remember—you thought of me afterward. But how? Did you wonder about me? You wished to see me again?"

"I thought of your eyes, Michael. They were so blue and sweet."

"Last night when I kissed you, you reached up and touched my face."

"Yes—it was so near, Michael."

"Does it mean that you love me, Roen? You'd know if you care for me. We've been a month here together. Can't you tell?"

"Can you, Michael?" She turned her face upward, because she longed for the touch of his eyes on hers.

"Yes, I know, Roen. Tell me, do you care for me?"

"Oh, Michael, yes, with my very inmost heart—with all my heart and soul I love you—"

He stood looking at her. Her eyes were so lovely, misted like that.

He wished to gaze at her a long time. She asked: "Will you say if you care for me, Michael?"

He caught her hand, a clutch at his throat. "You look so strong and lovely, Roen. Oh, you look so sweet—sweeter than

a dream. I love your eyes and your lips and your dear soft, hands—"

"You're so young, Michael. Oh, do you think you know?"

He looked down at her solemnly: "I know. I won't change, Roen. I come of a steadfast race . . . a race that loves early and long but ever the one girl—only one. You are that one for me."

She laughed singingly.

"We'll have to wait years, Michael."

"I can wait and work for you, Roen. Five years is not so long. . . . In five years, Roen, I'll be earning. I'll have a year of work behind me. I'll only be 24, you'll be 23 and Jackie will be a good age."

"A good age for what?"

"For me to help. Just when he'll need me, Roen. . . . He'll need a man," said he earnestly, not knowing the starry youngness of his eyes.

"Lord, I knew you were mine, Roen, from the moment I looked at you and when I touched your hand—ah, the dear, soft hand."

She put her arms out to him eagerly. They kissed, their eyes wet.

* * * * * * *

She came softly up the porch. She knelt at Jackie's bed and whispered a kiss against the rough, freckled cheeks. She felt like praying because this great gift had come to her—this great, holy gift.

How could he love her? How could he look with such gentle joyousness into her eyes? But he did.

* * * * * * *

In the morning they stood at the train, scarcely daring to meet each other's eyes. "Will you miss me, Asthore? As soon as you're home, I'll come. Look up, Roeny. If the crowd were not here, would you? Would you kiss me?"

"Yes!" She followed him to the steps.

He waved his hat to her from the train.

She and Jackie stood on the mound above the tracks and watched till the last dot of his face was gone. The crowd thinned from the station.

"Gee," said Jackie, "isn't it lonesome all of a sudden? Gosh, won't we be lonesome without him, Ronnie!"

CHAPTER V

TEN months passed. Their young, romantic ardor for each other deepened.

Roen would sit at her typewriter in the insurance office of James Burton and gaze across the bay to the Berkeley hills.

Here Michael dwelt. Here he went from class to class—poetic, thrilling figure with the wind ruffling his black curls. She often visioned herself taking Michael's hand, plunging with him into these hills and the brown hills closing them in deep, immortal isolation.

Other times the day dream had a sweeter climax. She would see herself at an altar—white-veiled, trembling: Michael taking her in his arms.

Day after day these visions recurred—disturbing yet delicious.

It was hard to contemplate the merciless years of waiting. Wait until Dearie was better: until Jackie was educated: until the debts were paid, and, in some miraculous fashion, life became easy and opulent. Then Michael would be finished college: then he would earn handsomely. Then they would live!

Dearie was aware of Roen's preoccupation: of her complete and dooming love. She waited quietly for the infatuation to end. Roen would grieve for a while. Then forget. Youth does.

But as the first year now drew to a close, she felt bitter.

Why must the girl throw her life away? It was becoming plain, to any but the love-blind eyes of girlhood that James Burton wanted her and would make her richly happy. All their problems would vanish.

Before Michael's advent, Roen had drawn a gay, wistful picture of her employer. He had a storied charm because of the oft-repeated legend that his bride-to-be died the night before their wedding. This was ten years ago. And he hadn't looked at a woman since . . . though he was blonde and tall and attractive. Very young girls in the down-town offices thrilled to a tale like that.

And now Burton began paying delicate court to Roen: making excuses to drive her home from work: sending boxes of candy to Jackie and books to Dearie. He was curious about Roen's family, about the invalid Dearie and the gay little brother whose mere name brought a glow to the girl's cheeks. He thought Roen a fine, brave type and he found her eyes with their long, russet brows most provocative and winning.

One Sunday he rang the bell. Dearie received him. He brought a basket of peaches which he had picked himself.

"For you, little mother," he said gallantly. "And you must tell me if you like the books I send."

Dearie was charmed with the man's elegance. He asked her if she would like to ride in his machine some Sunday.

"It would be most gratifying, most wonderful," she answered with naïve delight. "For all of us."

Roen, told of the surprising visit, was non-plussed, and perhaps a trifle flattered.

In the following week Dearie asked with child-like unrest: "Did he say anything more about the automobile trip? Do

you think he really meant it?" Not in many years: not since Bobby-dad went, had Roen seen her mother bright with expectance.

She found herself waiting impatiently for Burton to name a definite Sunday. And rushing home with the gala news when finally he did.

Dearie took to the joy of it like a queen to her throne. She settled down in the plungy cushions, her arm about Jackie's shoulder. Their soft, excited voices wafted in gay echoes about Roen's ears.

"My mother," said Roen wistfully, "has never been in an automobile before."

Burton gave her a quick, pleased look. Away from business he seemed younger, jauntier. She could understand why his associates spoke of him affectionately as "Jimmie."

The day had a fresh, sweet tang. It was the last of July. For weeks the fogs had rolled in gloomy tumult through the Gate, but now there was a braggart glow over hills and water. Sun everywhere. One could put out a hand and feel it like a rain.

It made the leaves shine and the bay sparkle. They drove up a slope in the Presidio, catching in canvas of flashing light and color a first glimpse of the Marin Hills, the yachts skimming a sea quiet and silky as a sapphire.

They were almost ashamed of their excitement. Jackie, husky with delight, pointed out the islands, and, oh, gee, look at those sails. Say, this is fun all right!

No one could help the surge of gladness. Roen found herself laughing: found herself talking in gay, responsive frankness. Yes! Go down the peninsula and up into the hills:

saunter past the princely estates. Go round the world and back again to the tune of this softly humming motor.

* * * * * * *

Evening. The sun sinking in languid splendor to a crimson couch the waters laid.

They paused on the cliffs above Baker's Beach.

"Do you like this view?" Burton asked. She glanced at him, astonished.

"Because," he added hastily, "I think it wonderful. I'd like a home here."

The lonely eminence had a poetic splendor. Roen remarked this, and looking into Burton's blonde face, found it suffused with red.

"The land is mine," he added. "Would you fancy it as a home site?"

"I would, indeed!"

* * * * * * *

That night Dearie sat before the low fire they always lit against the chill of the night. Her hands were clasped. A smile thrilled her pale, lovely face. They were a study in contrasts: the one fragile as a seraph, the other a radiant young goddess, sunburnt and joyous. In the shadowed eyes of the girl, a deep, warm tenderness: shallow, wistful appeal in the look of the mother.

Suddenly—softly—without even first twining her hand in Roen's hair, Dearie said: "He cares for you, Roen."

"Because he takes us for a machine ride? I told him you and Jackie had never been in one. He promised a long time ago to come and get us."

Dearie raised her hands and clasped them over her eyes: "I

am not judging by that. There are a few years, Roen, when a young girl who has beauty may scorn the world . . . a few, short years when she may beckon to whatever man she will, knowing that he will answer. Those years are now yours. They will vanish quicker than you know. A new tide of youth, lovelier because it will be fresher, is even now rushing in.

"Don't fling away your priceless hour. You can never reclaim it. No matter how strong and how fine and how beautiful you grow, you will see the world receding from you—"

"Why do you say these things to me, mother?"

"Because I see further than you can. You will go on working and scheming to keep even. You will be troubled by each little debt. After years of this, what happiness will you achieve?"

Roen reached up and took her mother's hand, feeling infinitely wiser and more valiant than this fragile Dearie.

How odd that Dearie, who had received such holy love, could now quietly advise her daughter to live deliberately and cautiously and wisely. That is not to live at all, thought Roen.

No! One must fling out heart and spirit in a splendid abandon. Give—never count the cost. Pour out to Life all that one has. Then Life will bare her brimming breast and yield it back sweeter and enriched.

* * * * * * *

A few days after their Sunday ride, Burton said abruptly:

"You like your work, Roen? Do you intend to remain in business?"

At her blank, amazed look, he gave a short, nervous laugh. "Why, you see, we're going to enlarge this department. I'm making a trip to New York next week in the reorganization.

I want to keep you here as my secretary, but whatever arrangements I make now, I want to be as permanent as possible. I wonder if I can count on you for a somewhat definite period?"

A slow color crept upward over his jaws. "You're not thinking of marriage, are you?"

"No, Mr. Burton, I'm not. You can count on me for at least four years—perhaps much longer."

"How can you be so very certain, Roen?"

"That's quite easy. Even if I wished to think of marriage, it would be impossible for me. I have my mother and Jackie. I wouldn't dream of leaving them."

"You might marry a man rich enough to take care of your mother and Jackie." His voice became low, became intense and questing, though his face remained almost emotionless in the expression. "You need not forswear marriage because of your family, need you?"

The suppressed heat of his excitement was communicated to her. She shrugged it off with attempted lightness. "Most men think themselves brave enough to take a wife, without acquiring a mother and an eleven-year-old son into the bargain."

"Of course," said he, his face flaming, "no man wants to come third with his wife. But if your mother was provided for, could you not leave her as other girls do?"

The room seemed crowded, enveloped in shadow. He stood quiet, utterly quiet, his hand on the long, slender cigar poised motionless at his lips.

Almost to herself, and with a slow, burning wrench at her heart, "Who would look out for Jackie? I wouldn't give him up for all the men on earth!"

She looked up with a frank, tender laugh. "You can count

on me, Mr. Burton. You know I've taken care of Jackie always and he is to have all the dreams. He shall go to college and do all that I hungered to do but could not."

From across the room Burton's voice now crept hesitantly, softly: "Must you do all this alone? Are you determined that no one shall help you? There may be one, Roen, who would hold it a precious honor to share and make possible your dream for Jackie."

She was aware of tremendous importance in her answer. "There is no one who can help, Mr. Burton."

He flicked the long cone of ashes from his cigar. He felt shaken—yet relieved.

He could be sure of her. Four years or more. She was not planning an early marriage with Michael, as he'd feared.

"Well," said he, squaring his well-knit, graceful shoulders, "that's quite a job you've undertaken. You'll need many a lift along that uphill road. No reason why we shouldn't have an automobile trip now and then, is there?"

"Oh, mother adores it," said the girl.

Her heart was light as a feather. As Burton left the room she turned with a long, joyous gaze to the Berkeley hills. All clear ahead!

"For you, my darling Michael."

CHAPTER VI

They saw each other on Friday night and once in a while on Sunday. Increasingly, as the months flew by, Roen found herself waiting for this one day. All afternoon she went about with flame and gaiety.

Michael arrived at the door of the cottage just in time to help with the supper. There was hilarious opening of cans: stirring of savoury but terrible-looking dishes. After supper they played indoor baseball or pingpong, because neither could bear to slight Jackie.

But the moment Jackie was safely in bed they slapped the racquets and balls into the box. They grabbed each other's hands and went running through the alley and across the street to the park. Oh, the incredible sweetness of each first swift kiss!

She blushed, expecting it. And now, standing before the mirror, hastily coiled her thick, shining hair. She ran in and knelt so that Dearie could button the white voile dress.

Dearie saw the flushed loveliness of her profile, with the half-closed dreaming eyes. Dearie's hands trembled. "Roen, why are you so excited?"

"Only in a hurry, dearest."

For answer, Dearie's fingers fumbled. "You are thinking seriously of this boy, Roen?"

Roen laughed nervously: "Yesterday, mother, you told me

I'd dangled Mr. Burton long enough. You wanted me to rush in and elope with him on the spot. Now, today, you think it must be Michael. Are you bound to marry me off before next week?"

"I'd like to save you from sorrow. This is all I see for you in the choice you seem to be making."

Keeping her head down and staring at the hands she now manicured so devotedly because her hands were a joy to Michael: "Why do you see sorrow for me, Dearie?"

"You're flinging your heart away. You're letting the years pass as though you expected youth to last forever. And you're wearing out the patience of a fine, strong man to gamble on a boy. By the time Michael is a man he may cease to care for you. This happens more often than not."

Roen's thought challenged: "He is a man already! He's all the man I want!"

She said nothing, but listened to Dearie's words.

"This man knows his own mind. He cares deeply for you. I saw it in the beginning—that very first time he took us out."

"He has not asked me to marry him, Dearie," said Roen, sticking to the literal facts. "He never speaks of love."

Her relation with Burton had passed into a rather delightful friendship. He liked to hear her opinions of the books he brought. The Sunday rides became almost a habit. And he kept tab on her, inquiring minutely about her comings and goings.

When she returned from her last vacation he was so effusively glad to see her that he grabbed her hands and stood pressing them, his whole face alight. He said: "I missed you! By thunder, it was a long two weeks."

But from the day of their momentous interview he did not intimate a more urgent interest. Roen had a hidden conviction that at a faint sigh from her, he would speak. Yet it now shocked her to hear Dearie say:

"You compel him to be silent. You hold him off. He feels this. Yet at times you seem charmed with him."

"He's very pleasant," said Roen softly. "And he has a good mind." To herself, she added: "Yes, good, but without the spark! It hasn't the flash and thrill."

She jumped up quickly and kissed Dearie's golden curls. Here and there was a single thread of silver. "You want me to be happy, don't you, darling? Well, I am!"

She spoke the truth. She was almost violently happy. Sometimes, riding on the car, she looked in the staid, solemn faces of men and women and could have wept in tender pity. It seemed almost wrong that others didn't hear the blessed, everlasting song within her thought.

It was also true that she was letting the years fly. They couldn't go quickly enough. She would have dashed them all away to reach that sublime moment when Michael would be hers, and she, his.

They didn't know when this could be. As soon as Michael was earning enough. Or before that—they would pool their earnings and make a go of it!

This need of postponement was their one depression. Each month Roen thought: "I'll save a little. By the time we're ready I'll have something laid by."

But it took every cent of the $90 she was now earning to keep them. Yet this was a good wage . . . better than most girls received.

It wasn't enough. New things had to be bought for the house—even the sheets were beginning to melt in the washing. And when Jackie reached high school a budget had to be made for that. Many a night Roen lay awake with strained and aching mind, wondering how in the world she could ever manage. In the tightest pinch it never occurred to her that she could be sufficiently driven that she would turn from Michael to James Burton.

For all this worrying, they had their tall, glowing compensations. There was the day when Jackie got his first long trousers. The three of them—Michael, Roen and the furiously blushing youngster, went from store to store, pretending not to be satisfied with the style—praying that somewhere the style, about which Jackie was mightily determined, and the price would meet.

And there was the summer when Michael worked and they didn't go to the country. Roen went to the campus and visited the summer school on her vacation. In the evening Michael met her. They wandered over the hills. They were so pleased with each other. They praised even the breeze, as though it blew for their benefit.

One lovely evening in spring, as soon as they reached the trees of the park, Michael swept his arms about her: "I've something great to tell you," said he. He tucked her hand under his arm, close to his heart, so that she could hear its thumping, "We're going to the Junior Prom.

"Oh, Michael, how?"

"On the boat and the train."

"But I can't! Why, what would I wear?"

"Anything, anything—they don't dress much—"

"Well, could I wear this?" She pulled open her coat as though he did not know by heart each ruffle on the little white voile.

"Oh—not that exactly."

"It's the best I have. Oh, Michael, I can't dare spend money for an evening dress. I'd have to get gloves, too."

He took hold of her arms and looked at her in a hot moodiness: "Well, we're going! I've bought tickets and I'm filling out your program. Look here, Roeny, you're past 20 and you've never been to a real, stunning affair yet."

She gave a little fluttering laugh that might have been a cry and tossed her head back: "Why I don't even feel sure that I can dance well enough . . ."

"Well, here, then, we'll practice!" He caught her hand and made her follow him. They danced in the shadows under the trees. He laughed softly, humming in that rich, sweet tenor that Dearie called his brogue: "Ah, your holy delicate white hands, my dark Rosaleen—my own Rosaleen."

She closed her eyes, her heart on fire.

Early the next afternoon, a Saturday, he appeared with a box under his arm. In it were seven yards of shimmering jade green satin. "Get your hat, Asthore, we'll go and choose the pattern."

She shook out the silk. It rippled like a sunlit sea. "You shouldn't have done this, Michael."

But he was delighted that he had been inspired to think of it. "And there are the gloves—twenty buttons, ma'am!"

She flung back her head and laughed—a long time with her eyes closed.

She said softly, hiding her face suddenly against his

shoulder: "There is no one like you, Michael—no one on all the wide green earth!"

They went up Haight street together and spent hours choosing the pattern—little puff sleeves, a wide, snug girdle and long sheath skirt after the style of 1913. They rushed home and laid the tissue on the lustrous fabric.

"I'll cut!" said Michael.

"Oh, no! Be careful. . . . Read the directions first."

They agonized over it. She had never owned anything so lovely. When it was finished and laid on her bed the night of the ball, she felt certain that a queen had never a more wondrous robe.

When they reached the campus that thrilling night, groups were wending in a kind of eagerness toward Harmon gymnasium. Coming nearer, it seemed to Roen a flight of gaudy butterflies. Bright colored veils fluttered as girls in pale, delicate wraps went tripping up the steps.

"I feel like a tall, brown caterpillar in this old coat, Michael," she murmured, almost silly with excitement. "Oh, look back there—that path through the trees!" She thought tremulously, how proud Michael must be to belong to this inspiring place.

An awed, warm feeling enfolded her. . . . She was ready to speak graciously with other girls in the dressing room. They stood in groups of three or four and appraised her coldly. She was an outsider. College men liked girls from the outside. Often indeed the classiest fellows brought girls from the city. The feminine students resented this, regarding it a slur on their fascinations. They didn't share Roen's mood of friendliness.

She buttoned the pretty satin slippers, powdered her nose

and now, a little nervous and lonely, waited for Michael.

An astonished flush swept his eyes. They turned on her with that brimming, tender gaiety, "Is it you, Roeny? You look a dream—a perfect dream."

She closed her eyes and swept onward, her hand light as a flower on his arm.

He was godlike, nobler than ever. They went gliding into music and light.

An immense fish-net draped from the balconies bloomed with brilliant red geraniums. The stage was banked with greens—polished green garlands splashed with scarlet flowers made bowers of every corner . . .

He handed her a little program with the names already filled in. She glanced at it hastily and to her blank alarm found the name of Michael only for the first dance and the last. In all the other spaces were initials.

"We're only to have two together?" she said in a low, stricken voice.

He answered seriously, "How many did you want?"

"And do I have to meet all of these strangers, and won't I see you from the first dance to the last?"

Whimsical lights danced for a second across his face. Then he whirled her off into a waltz. She found it hard to make her steps glide joyously.

"Is this the custom at college dances, Michael?"

At the quiet tone he glanced suddenly in her face—found it very white and the sweet, ardent mouth he so loved, now trembling pitifully. He was instantly touched and in a flash read her heart. "Roeny—Roeny—why you darling, don't you

know that I'm S and K and M and Z and every other initial when it's on your program?"

Her eyes closed—for an instant the lights were dimmed. He bent down and kissed her wet lashes. He said huskily: "Dear Asthore!"

Roen never forgot the thrill of this moment. Always afterwards, with the memory of the immense fish-net and its scarlet geraniums, would recur the sweetness of his young lips brushing her wet lashes.

* * * * * * *

After this they went to the college functions. For days before a ball Roen went about on tiptoe with excited anticipation. She wondered how she would wear her hair—if she might spend a dollar for a string of pearls—if she should bind a piece of green velvet, Grecian-like, across her forehead. And the ride home at midnight with the lights of the city dancing on a hundred hills! The boat gliding through the dark, majestic waters and her hand pressed against Michael's heart.

She wore the green dress and felt regal in it until one night she overhead a girl who was jealous of Roen's charm say: "Here she comes in the everlasting green!"

She ripped the beloved garment to pieces, had it dyed black and remade in a daring directoire style. She looked rather startling with her full, supple grace, her burnished hair and dark, warmly passionate eyes. She took Michael's breath away.

She had grown dearer to him—so very dear. He told her this. He said that each month it grew harder waiting for their

Fridays; that he longed so to see her, it was an everlasting gnawing ache in his mind. And he ended, yearning: "Thank God, Roeny, we'll soon have done with it!"

She treasured as priceless jewels things like this that Michael said. She tucked them away on the strings of her heart, and often as she lay awake at night she felt them there, glowing and warm.

In spite of all that had been said—all the fears and doubts of others—he cared, and more than ever.

CHAPTER VII

And now at last, the tremendous, sacred hour of Michael's graduation was come. How long distant it seemed that summer on the river. Now in a magician's trice it was upon them.

Roen asked James Burton for a day off. Early in the morning she and Jackie were up.

Anyone would think it was Jackie who was to strut proudly across the platform and receive his degree. It took him an hour to scrub and shower; another hour to get his clothes ready and comb his hair. He wore this parted in the middle and curved in two little horns over his forehead.

Roen teased him about those curls. He grinned and blushed, but nothing could induce him to change the style. He was secretly convinced that Irma Eaves, the girl who was his partner in the debate, found him handsome, and he was certain that Irma admired the gay swing of his heavy brown hair.

He was a tall, chuckling lad, infallibly gay, as he had been when Roen so joyously received him as a gift from Bobby-dad. His freckles had vanished to an all pervading tan. And he'd made the second football team, but, being very much younger than the other boys in his class, he was too light for the regulars: "I'm going to make it yet, Ron! Think so?" he would add doubtfully.

And Roen proud as a mother—looking on him as the very

son of her spirit—would sweep her arm huggingly about his shoulders and give him any answer that he wanted.

He came to her now and rubbed his hand unhappily over his chin: "Say, Ron, don't you think I should begin to shave? Look at this fuzz."

Her heart squeezed. Oh, too soon he would be the adored little Jackie no longer—her little, needing lad. Too soon he would be a man.

"Oh, I wouldn't, Jackie. You'll ruin your complexion. Think of that!"

"Aw, how can a razor hurt? Think it matters if I just shave without lathering?"

She knew that he had already done this. When finally he appeared with his newly-pressed suit, a handkerchief deftly tucked in the coat pocket, his chin was smooth as a girl's.

Riding over on the boat he said to her abruptly: "Gee, I just love Mike! Weren't we lucky to meet him, Ron?"

Tears rushed to Roen's eyes.

She and Jackie sat leaning forward, pressed closely together, heedless of the hot May sun. When the young men and the young women in black caps and gowns filed to their places on the vast stage of the amphitheater they gazed breathlessly. "There," said Jackie solemnly—"there he goes!"

Michael's turn came. He walked across the stage and took his diploma.

Roen watched in a trance. And every word of the stirring commencement address was meant for Michael. He, above all others, was the one who would write his name in letters of light on the walls of the world.

She sat with her hands clasped, no longer listening—lost in

the vividness of the dream that now unrolled before her. Michael would go forth as he was ordered by these speakers. He would throw honor on his university. He would do stalwart things.

She wiped her eyes, for she saw herself walking hand in hand with this brave, noble Michael. They would go down the long, gay years together.

That night Michael came. They walked out to the music stand and there in the darkness and silence they found a bench . . .

"I was so proud of you, dear Michael. . . . You seemed nobler than all the others."

He kept his arm about her and for a long while they sat quietly.

Then she said: "Michael, how four years have flown . . ."

"No—they have not flown. They have gone slowly, Asthore."

"Do you care as much, Michael? Dear Michael, tell me just the truth."

He stooped down and searched her face. "Roen—oh, God Almighty, can you ask—" He suddenly caught her in his arms and pressed her to him so that his heart went thumping wildly against her own. He said, huskily: "Roen, let us be married tonight."

They clung to each other. She strained through the moonlight to see his eyes.

Then she laughed faintly: "If we could, Michael!"

"But all this waiting is wrong, Roen—terribly wrong."

"Ah yes, Michael—wrong."

"We're giving up the real—we're refusing life." He was

suddenly smitten by her white, despairing look and began to brush the soft curls at her forehead. "Never mind, Roeny. Listen—"

He told eagerly his hopes. He would start earning now—$100 a month—fair enough for a chemical engineer just out of college. Fabulous opportunities in this field. He would find his.

"And then—Roeny, then at last!"

Oh prospect dizzyingly sweet! Rhythm of the universe sweeping their separate beings for one transcendent moment to a rapt identity.

They decided that, come what might, they would marry at the end of another year.

CHAPTER VIII

One day Burton kept Roen working till after eight. They went to a small restaurant for a hasty supper.

Burton began talking of Jackie: of his progress at school. He grew eager, boy-like.

Suddenly he pushed the flowers against the wall, and leaning over, touched Roen's hand: "Roen, could you grow to care for me? Listen, I wouldn't want you to marry me because it would make life easy for you. I know you wouldn't do this. But I've watched you struggling against pretty cruel odds and I've wanted to help because I care for you. I'd love to take you from the grind. I could do so much for your mother. . . . I could help you give opportunity to Jackie. . . . Roen, you can never do the things for your brother that you plan. You can't send him to college. . . . I can. It would mean nothing to me. And listen, Roen, though I wouldn't want you to marry me because of this, can't you see you'd be bound to love me after a while?"

He lowered his head and was now pleating the tablecloth with cold, shaking fingers. These trembling fingers touched her piercingly—

She said softly, smiling and pleading: "Of course I'd love you if you did all that. I love you even for thinking of it. . . . But not as you mean. Why, I thought you knew of—of me. I was sure you guessed."

"Oh." And so quietly she scarcely heard: "Are you engaged, Roen? Is there no hope at all?"

"We've been engaged for years."

He took long, deep breaths, his face white and mask-like.

After a long stillness: "That first time I spoke, you knew I cared then?"

"I thought so."

"And it was already too late?"

"Yes."

"Singular," said he, sinking his teeth in his lip, "a moment ago you seemed so near. . . . Don't let me make you unhappy, Roen."

"But I was so certain you were aware."

"Oh, I was—I was! Why else did I keep silent? I saw that your heart was taken. I wouldn't ask because I wished to keep on hoping. Are you to be married soon?"

"No—that is, we fear not—"

"Ah—well—well, you will not think of what I've said. You will not let it interfere with your work. You will go on as before." He helped her to his car, insisting on driving her home. He reached over and took her hand. "You'll promise me this, Roen. Stick to the job. It doesn't make any difference that I've spoken, does it? Because you've known all along that I cared."

She felt so sorry for him as he sat there with his head down, his lips steadied and pale—a stillness about him—a little boy look.

He came with her up the steps. He stood bare-headed, holding her hand. Suddenly he stooped and kissed it. He said:

"Good-bye, Roen." And without looking back hurried to the car and drove away.

Dearie waited in the living room.

"Was that Mr. Burton's car? He drove you home? How kind he is!" Whenever Dearie spoke of James Burton her voice trembled, though she resolutely tried to keep it calm. And her eyes always searched Roen's face. "Why you seem excited, Ronnie. You're all flushed."

Roen laughed: "There's a high wind out and we've been working hard."

"Just you and Mr. Burton?"

"Yes."

"Did you have any dinner?"

"Yes."

"Oh, did he take you to dinner?"

"I should hope so, seeing that he kept me from food till 8 o'clock. I think I'll go to bed. I'm tired. Come along, dearest."

She helped her mother. As she stooped down for the good night kiss, Dearie clasped her hands at Roen's neck. She put her cheek on Roen's and said with a faint, happy sob: "Ronnie, dear!"

It caught Roen with a pang and long afterwards she remembered her mother's look and tone.

When she reached the office building that next morning, a sunny August morning, her steps dragged. She did not wish to go in there and sit all day in the same room with James Burton. There would be all these quivering admissions between them—sad, embarrassed things. She went in, reluctant.

By noon he had not arrived. At 3 o'clock she received a

letter by messenger. Burton was on his way to New York. He thought that was better . . . take this trip now instead of next week as he'd planned. By the time he returned, in six or seven weeks, she'd forget what he said . . .

She read it and was filled with a warm, grateful admiration. And not for a moment did it occur to her that she had flouted Life—had turned her back on a fine and shining gift.

For her face was turned to the sunlight. She felt often as though she were breathing radiance, so happy were the days. It was the fall of 1915—the year of the Exposition.

In the evenings they would wander through the enchanted gardens, watching the russet moon rising over the Golden Gate. And the breeze would come softly, redolent of music and perfume.

Later they would see a tall, slim figure standing patiently, Jackie waiting for them to have done with dreaming and come to the Zone. They were three kids together as they went riding madly over the Scenic Railway or bumping down the rapids in a rickety boat.

As the closing hour approached, they always walked back through the court of flowers, rejoicing in the soft, lovely colors, the tune-filled breeze, the whole royal vision of beauty. It was sweet to be living and loving.

CHAPTER IX

USUALLY on Christmas they went about with subdued joyousness because the holidays were hard on Dearie. In Christmas week Bobby-dad had died. The cottage was haunted with this thought. Dearie would lie in the great old-fashioned lounging chair watching with remote, sad smile their tense, expectant faces—Roen hiding things from Jackie—Jackie wanting her to take guesses on what he had in this bundle and in that.

And always at this time Roen went softly down the hall, remembering the night fat Maggie pushed her to her father's room, remembering the kind, wondrous look suddenly vanishing and his dear, teasing eyes darting about like little animals terribly scared.

She would come back to the living room, kiss the tears from her mother's eyes, whispering: "Dearie, he'd want us to be glad. Can't you smile, Dearie? Please!" Dearie would answer with a look of gentle accusation— Could she forget? So at Christmas time there was always this, like sad undertones running through music. Putting red berries in the vases that seemed too chipper—too brightly polished . . .

But today the undertones were lost. Jackie knelt before the fire popping corn. . . . He'd bought a tree—bought it all by himself that very morning. He got it for 20 cents because it was the last one and a scrawny thing. He was decorating it

with cotton dipped in silver powder and with garlands of popcorn.

Roen came beside him and gave his arm a shove: "Shake it quicker—quicker!" With a laugh she put the bowl in Dearie's lap: "String it!"

Dearie looked astonished at her blooming face and the glow of her dreaming eyes. Roen turned her back quickly, pretending to steady the little tree in its improvised stand. If all the world wept today she couldn't yield a tear. Michael had given her a gift.

It hung about her neck. Last evening he brought it. He was so thrilled that his eyes blinked when she took the box. He said huskily: "Hurry—then I'll tell you."

It was a ring in an old, dulled setting of tawny gold—a flower with fine, numberless petals growing up and closing about an immense, blood-red ruby—a thing of life and passion and fire. Within the band was carved minutely "To Macushla, 1877. To Asthore, 1915."

The betrothal ring of Michael's mother and now Roen's. She looked into his blinking, tender eyes—at his trembling lips. . . . He laughed softly. "I only got it a month ago. . . . I could hardly save it till tonight. . . . That stone is the blood of hearts that never change, Roen."

This was the rapt undertone that today ran in music through her thoughts. . . . The blood of Michael's heart crystallized into a jewel and burning in secret ecstasy above her own.

For such a thing well might one wait an eon!

She stepped back from the tree, surveyed it critically.

"Isn't it strange, Roen, that Mr. Burton gave you nothing?"

Roen jumped: "Why, he did—the same as usual—half my salary added to my check . . ."

"But last year he sent you the candy and the flowers and all those books and the gloves."

"He's in New York, Dearie. Didn't I tell you? He's always taking trips between the home office and here."

This was the truth—since that night in August, Roen had been alone three weeks out of four. She took work from Burton's assistant. There was talk that Burton would be given charge of the Eastern office.

Dearie stuck the needle through the popcorn. Her lips were very white. To Roen's dismay, Jackie now went out to fill the coalscuttle. Dearie said in a quick, frightened way: "He hasn't taken us for a ride in months—not since that night you went to dinner with him."

"He went away then, Dearie—the next day."

"Oh, the next day. The day after you had that dinner with him—"

"She knows," Roen thought.

For an instant there flashed through her every pulse a withering, resentful hurt. Dearie wished her to feel guilty. Dearie thought she had no right to refuse James Burton. Thought she had obstinately put SELF first.

Of course she had!

She took Jackie's garlands and began draping them on the tree. Yes—Dearie said a girl had this golden hour when the world lay at her feet and she might beckon to whatever man she would. Roen had stood in hers and without a loitering regret swept away its shining privilege.

She shut her eyes suddenly and smiled, feeling Michael's ring touching against her skin—blood of a heart that would never change—

Down many a year that Christmas night went glowing. Late, after Jackie and Dearie were in bed, she and Michael sat in the living room. The dwindling flame of the logs and the candles flickering so elfin-like on the tree filled the room with poetry and shadows. They toasted buns over the embers and crunched on fine thick slices of turkey. They grinned at each other—this was better than the dinner. They had a cup of chocolate and made a table of the firebox.

"Roeny, I think I'm going to get a raise. I think I'll soon be making $150. After that, if I'm any good at all, and I know I am, I'll go right up. In a few years I'll easily have $500 a month."

She fixed her eyes on his that were bluer than sapphires. "One hundred and fifty? That makes $250 counting all. Michael! We have enough between us."

He clasped his hands tightly about his cup, burning spots coming to his cheeks. "You mean you would go on working? We could marry if you kept on with your job?"

They leaned on their elbows, talking into each other's faces: "Shall we do that, Roeny? Is this the kind of marriage you want?"

She slumped down, feeling queerly exhausted. Deep in her thought, hovering there, dewy, tremulous and lovely was the vision of a child—her child and Michael's. In the beginning, this dream had come to her—almost with his first kisses. Whenever she thought of their marriage, she thought of the little blue-eyed child that would come to them.

Michael was aware of this. The longing was to him mysterious and inexplicable. It awakened an almost religious awe: a feeling of wonder intensifying his love.

If Roen were to keep on working—indefinitely, this hope would go.

He came to her and made room for himself on her chair. With a sudden catchy laugh: "We can stand it, Roen, a little longer. We've waited this long. Now what would we have if you keep on working? You run this house on $100 now. We should manage on $150 even with me thrown in. I can be awfully economical if I've got to be.

"Asthore, say we can be married when I'm earning $150. Will you let me come and live here? All I get will be yours. You won't have to change a thing. I can do for Dearie, and Jackie is almost as dear to me as he is to you. So why should it not work out?"

She wondered at her uncontrol: at a sudden wild impulse to weep.

"Roeny, we may wait too long. We'll be old." He crossed his arms about her and looked with moist, laughing eyes in hers: "Have you promised? Asthore, say that you will."

She touched his face. It was so winning. "I will. Dear Michael—yes."

CHAPTER X

It was not the way they'd pictured the future—but it was their only chance. Sometimes Roen shuddered with the vision of Michael coming to the little cottage. Quietly at the end of each month, he would lay his earnings in her hand, would look to her a little beseeching and helpless because he would know it wasn't enough. All the tender gaiety of their love might vanish.

But more often she dwelt on the joyous bustle in the kitchen when Michael, wondrous chef that he counted himself, took charge of the dinner. Every night would be like Friday night. She and Jackie and Michael—why, they could be merry!

Dearie became aware of these secret plans. One evening in early spring, as Roen stooped suddenly, she caught a glimpse of the magnificent ruby gleaming from its chain on Roen's neck. She asked about it. And Roen was forced to show it.

Not long after this as Roen read before the fire, Dearie called her.

"Come and sit here where you used to sit."

"Why do you speak in that tone, mother?"

Dearie smiled in a forlorn way.

"Why do you say 'sit here where you used to sit?' "

"Yes, Ronnie, on the little footstool as you used to sit a long while ago, when you begged for my hand in your hair."

Roen moved over, astonished and troubled.

"I'm standing in your way, Ronnie. I know more than you think."

"What way have I that a small thing like you, Dearie, can block?"

But she guessed what Dearie was about to say and felt warm, tightened up, trembling.

"You want to marry Michael. And you cannot because of your brother and me."

"No! That's not so! Even if we were alone we couldn't marry yet."

Dearie repeated quietly: "You want to marry Michael. You dare not even make a plan because of Jackie and me. You think there's no solution. But there IS, Roen. Jackie is 15—old enough. He can go to work. And you can go."

"Oh, can I, mother?" said Roen, stricken. "Do you think Jackie could earn enough? He's not 15 until May and you think he can earn $100 a month. Where? Where can he even get $50? Times are not so gala! And you think Jackie is going to be deprived. You think I'll let him be cheated? For Michael? For ANYONE! Why, if Michael wanted this—if even for a moment he asked it, I'd fling him away and never look at him again. But he doesn't want this! Michael would die of shame to have Jackie grabbed out of school and sent to work to spare us!

"We've waited four and a half years, nearly five, Dearie," she went on more gently. "In one more Michael will be earning enough."

"And then," murmured Dearie softly, fearfully, her pale thin fingers laced across her eyes, "you will be married and Michael shall support us all?"

The words so baldly stated made them seem beggars.

"Yes," Dearie went on very stilly. "This is what you intend. But this, Roen, you shall never do. I shall not permit Michael to support me and your brother. Because it would be disastrous to you, to him—to all of us. In a very short while, Roen, you would find your love gone. In a very short while there would be no peace—there would be bitterness and resentment in this house.

"I am not misjudging Michael. If he had money, it would be different. I would feel it my duty to take cheerfully what you wished to give. I could do this knowing it meant no hardship.

"But do you think, Ronnie, I will sit here and take what I know can only be grudgingly given?"

"Oh, mother!"

"Yes! Inevitably this stage would be reached. Because the burden is unfair, Roen, I shall never eat this bitter bread!"

Roen shut her eyes. After a long, weighted, exhausting pause: "Well—humph—Michael must discover his oil well—"

Her mother trembled, the thin, delicate fingers laced over her eyes. "You do not fool me, Roen. I've thought—deeply. It shall be as I've said. Jackie and I can get along—"

Quivering with alarm—pale with it, Roen swept about: "Have you said these things to Jackie? Mother, tell me!

"No? Well, just spoil Jackie's life, mother, if you want to stand in my light! Just ruin this for me! If you mean to go on with this plan, I'll send Michael away. I'll never see him again! I'll—I'll—"

She turned her back quickly, clapping her hands over her face.

Standing so she was miserably aware of Dearie weeping—Dearie pressing the pretty handkerchief to her eyes. She went dully to the pantry and poured a glass of wine. She filled the glass too full and took a little sip. How rakish was the windmill on the old blue willow plate!

She thought of Jackie—his gay chuckling laugh that was so like Bobby-dad's—the lengthening of his face now to stronger lines. Above the sink on a little shelf was a row of jelly glasses. And in these were Jackie's treasures preserved in alcohol. He was always adding to the collection . . . even across the room Roen saw the wings of the giant blue butterfly —and there was the June bug he captured a week ago.

Jackie was to be a doctor. He liked to study all living things. Once he was observing a great beetle under a microscope. He had the thrill of a discoverer when he could identify the organs of this specimen with those in the book's illustration. "Gee, Ron," he said, excitedly, compelling her to stand there and watch, "here's where your backbone begins. Doesn't it make you feel tight all over learning a thing like that?"

Jackie had the patience, the imagination, the perseverance that make for genius. He would be a great scientist. Dearie would cheat him of this.

Roen stood quiet, her eyes fixed on the crimson wine. She meant what she said. She could send Michael away as easily as she could see Jackie robbed.

She tossed her head back and swallowed. She brought the wine to her mother, helping her to bed.

"Dearie," she murmured gently, "think how lonely you'd be if I left you."

"I think of many things. MANY THINGS!"

"But Dearie, think of the happy ones. And please, don't say any of this to Jackie. Because it won't do any good. I won't let him do it. I meant what I said."

Dearie took but a sip of the wine. She lay back with her fingers laced over her eyes.

Roen lay awake far into the night, aching and distracted.

She saw with ruthless clearness, Michael could never come to Dearie's cottage. This was the shrine of another love. Dearie would not permit it to know a second.

* * * * * * *

Hectic paths of escape presented themselves. Some solution must be found.

In a pitiful way the matter was taken from Roen's hands. Dearie became ill with a quinsy sore throat. Her weak heart complicated this. Roen stayed home two weeks and nursed her.

One day the doctor said: "We should take your mother to the hospital. Don't delay this."

The long devastating months began. At 4 o'clock each afternoon Roen pulled the black cover over her typewriter. She stopped at the flower stand at Kearny and Market for a bunch of violets or the flaunting marigolds Dearie loved.

And she went swiftly—always quiet now—up the stone steps of the hospital where Dearie lay in a room with two other women, her bed partitioned off with white curtains.

Dearie was wasting away. She struggled bravely in a long siege of rheumatic fever.

She did not improve. The bills grew. Each month they were more formidable.

In September Roen stopped as usual for her monthly statement.

There was a balance from the past month. There was always a balance from the past month. She owed $200.

Regarding it quietly, Roen folded the paper and put it in her purse. In the purse was also a bill from the doctor—the first he had sent, though it was five months he had cared for Dearie.

She said to herself as she climbed on the car: "I owe $300. Next week I'll owe $350 and the next—" She felt witheringly hot. She bit her lips and refused to think.

As she went in the alley and caught the smell of roast potatoes she tossed back her head. Jackie in her long apron getting their dinner. Soon he would be talking with strained hilarity. Even Jackie was not quite so infallibly gay now.

The months had taken a bitter toll. At first she had refused to admit that Dearie's illness would last—oh, long—though the doctor told her so.

Now she gave way to panic. That night, when she thought Jackie was in bed and sleeping, she sat in the living room with her bills before her. She said stilly: "I can't make out! Oh, Lord, what am I to do!" The tension of her long self-control broke. She buried her head in her arms and began to cry. Desperate panic of tears.

She didn't hear the step. But suddenly Jackie said: "Gosh —what's the matter, Ron?"

He saw the bills and picked them up.

Averting her head quickly, she tried to grab them.

He went fumbling in his pocket. "I was afraid to tell you, Ron. Here—"

He spilled greenbacks on the table before her. "That'll help!"

She fingered them blindly, bewilderedly: "Where did you get these, Jackie?" There was $150.

"Working," said he simply. "I've been working."

"Where?" asked she, sick with dread. "You've quit school?"

"Just took a leave. Just since the beginning of the term. I can go back in January. Gosh, Ron, I had to."

Without looking up, her hands stole across to his. She said nothing.

"You're not angry, Ron?"

She said, tear-choked: "I'm—I'm—oh you angel."

She was proud, almost broken with the joy of her pride in him. He was worthy of all her mighty hopes.

* * * * * * *

In November they brought Dearie home.

Michael came. He brought a suitcase filled with flowers from his aunt's garden. He helped Roen mass the gorgeous chrysanthemums. Bank the living room with riot and color.

Roen could not meet his eyes. He came over then and looked down at her sadly. He took her hands and pressed them in his own. "Don't be troubled, Roeny. And don't keep your eyes from me. I won't ask more than you can do."

He said this because he was earning $150.

But he wouldn't ask her to keep her promise because he saw that she couldn't. And because he, too, knew it would be a disaster to bring their love to her mother's cottage.

They would go on waiting.

CHAPTER XI

Because he bore it so gallantly, there entered into Roen's love a worshiping fervor. She longed to give boundlessly to him.

But as 1916 drew to a close, Michael became restless and preoccupied.

"Roeny, it's never to be. We've waited too long. Only fools postpone."

"Why is it never to be?"

"This war . . . this ghastly war."

She drew near to him and whispered: "What have you heard?"

"Nothing. Some day I will."

Michael's brothers—the four Irish brothers whose eyes were bluer and whose hair was blacker than his own, had been two years in France. Michael longed to go.

"But war is wrong. It's murder—cowardly murder, disguise it any way you want. My son goes out and kills another woman's son. What is brave in that, that clean youth should thrill to it?"

Many a night they argued. Now Stephen, youngest of the four and closest of all to Michael, was in the front line trenches. Stephen who was but two years married and who had a little son.

* * * * * * *

Twilight in the first of January. Roen waited on a bench in Union Square. All the grass was covered with red-brown leaves. The wind cradled them erratically.

She saw Michael and rose. He came quickly with his head down. His face appeared pale—very white and set. He took her hands and stood a moment with his head bowed.

Softly: "Michael?"

"Stephen is killed. Don't say anything, Roen!"

Nothing that anyone could say: nothing that he wished to hear.

Stephen was dead. He had lain hours in a shell-riddled dugout, the half of his beautiful face torn away. And there his brother who was in the same company, found him—still alive. In this frightful torment.

For hours no one had come. No one had done a thing. It was past belief.

"And I here. In safety. Eating—laughing—"

Others flinging their fine young lives away. Others dying for a glory. He—hanging back—safe. All the months he had grieved for this. He had ached and longed.

And now there was the vision of wounded men—men with young, handsome faces torn away—lying in a bleeding agony—perhaps a brother dying in rain and mud—

"Oh, God"—he pushed his hands before him. "My uncle is going."

"And you, Michael?"

He kept his face from her.

"You think you must? Oh, Michael dear. You've got to go?" She leaned forward, peering in his face.

His arm went around her then.

"When?" she asked, choking. "When, Michael?"

"I signed up—when I got this word—when I heard of Stephen."

He took her two hands and held them stilly. They looked a long time in each other's eyes. "Roen, we've loved each other a long time."

She clung to him, repeating: "Oh, yes—yes—a long time, Michael."

"And all this time, Roen, we couldn't marry. And now we can't marry. We don't know when—years—" He turned her to him, the sweet Irish eyes looking in hers with devouring tenderness.

She laughed softly, sobbing: "Marry me now!" Imploring: "Oh, Michael, surely—you will marry me now—"

"Do you mean this, Roen? You would marry me and let me go?"

She would not take her eyes from his. She would have drowned her soul in his questing eyes. "I would marry you, Michael! Is there time?"

She seemed to glow—her head thrown back, her face a lighted beauty. "When do you go, Michael?"

"Any time. I'm packed and ready. At a moment's notice."

"Then tomorrow—tomorrow noon. Oh, Michael, dear."

"Don't tempt me, Roen. Ah—'twould be selfish. You'll be left alone. And if I shouldn't—"

"No! Don't say that. Don't think it."

"Ah, but, Roen, are you doing this to please me? For me?"

"For us, Michael."

"Do you really want to? Are you glad about it?"

She raised her eyes to his: "No one will ever know—no one can ever know how glad!"

"Asthore, you are dear. Dearer than anything in life."

This word went into her soul. It sang there warmly—sweetly. In rapt, heart-breaking sweetness. Through years.

Roen closed the door of her room most softly this night. She sat with clasped hands and shut eyes. Tomorrow she and Michael would be married. Michael would go away. But their souls would dwell within each other.

She thought of him in a trench lying in mud as Stephen had lain. He would think of her. There would be memories and great sweetness between them. He would be hers.

She would be his. Tomorrow at noon. The love of all these years—the dreams of all the years flowed over her, warm, intoxicating. They would stand at an altar. The blue eyes seeking hers with such a world of wanting, turned now gently—brimming, tender. They would have this supreme and holy fulfillment.

There stole over her soft, young beauty a rapt, transfigured look. They would be married. Their profound, ardent yearning for each other answered. She felt his arms closing about her. She felt her whole being throbbing to music. She felt the dear, illusive thing—the secret, worshiped shadow presence stir within her thought. Her child and Michael's. Five and a half years it had murmured to her in the dark.

When Michael returned it would await him.

Misty-eyed, weak with an emotion of joy mingled with a pain that played on her like hunger-haunted music, she now laid out her wedding clothes.

They would go away for a few days. Some place remote from everyone—yet near.

* * * * * * *

Early in the morning she stole into Jackie's room. She leaned down and whispered against his warm, tanned cheek. Get up quickly—Michael going to the war. She and Michael to be married. Yes—today—

His young lips trembled. He turned his face quickly, ashamed to have feelings. "Can I come with you, Ron? Am I to stand up with you?"

"Who else . . . ?" she laughed, softly. "Will you give me to him, Jackie? Will you mind?"

She swept her arm huggingly about him and gulped. She felt heavy with a too great tenderness. Overborne with love for Michael—love for Jackie.

She took his ring and kissed it—pressed the blood-red ruby to her lips.

She was lost in a haze—moving toward him in a cloud of sorrow and beauty.

Roused from this by a ringing—ringing of the phone. A jangling shatter. Jackie talking—Jackie standing at her door—his face blurring.

"Mike—Mike—better go and talk to him. . . ."

"So early—not half past seven. . . ." This simple announcement of Michael wishing to speak with her put her in a panic. Then his voice came—hoarsely as though he had a cold.

"Roeny—Roeny—Asthore—"

"Oh, speak plainer, Michael. I've not heard. I can't hear you at all. . . ."

To her alarm and terror a sob came shaking across the wires.

CHAPTER XII

Roen leaned shivering and white against the phone, waiting for Michael's voice. "Roeny—I'm leaving now— The orders were here last night. Ten o'clock from the Oakland mole. Could you come, Roeny—say good-bye—"

She clung to the phone. She smiled at it, trying wildly to form words with her lips. She repeated vaguely, "Oh, now! You're leaving now. Yes, I'll come."

She went to Jackie and said vaguely: "He's going now. There won't be time for what I told you. Only to say good-bye. Come with me."

* * * * * * *

As the boat glided into the mole, Jackie stood up. "He's there, Ron. There's a crowd there. Must be other fellows going. Oh, he sees us! Ron, you're awful white!"

She rubbed her cheeks. She planted her feet firmly with each step.

Michael ran to them. He caught her two hands, pressed them between his that were very cold. He glanced to her eagerly—his young mouth and his young eyes trembling. He said softly, pleading: "Roeny, I never dreamed this! I thought I'd have weeks— I thought— Oh, Asthore!"

"Michael, you're turning away. Don't do that. I want to see your eyes. I love your eyes. Oh, you're crying! I am, too—it doesn't matter—"

They were unaware of others crowding to the train. A group of young men going north with Michael. Her hands went to his shoulders, clung there.

"Why shouldn't we cry a little? People always do. Oh, Michael! You going. Like this. Dear Michael—I could follow. Anywhere!"

He listened as though his heart could never have enough of this. Suddenly he said, faltering: "I may be kept a while in Vancouver. Would you, Roen? Will you?"

"Will I come there, Michael? Yes! No matter what."

He stooped and searched her eyes; searched her glowing, tender face now shouting so flamingly its love. He kissed her lips in a long, solemn fervor. "You are my wife—my dear, dear wife, Asthore! And I belong to you. Remember!"

The breeze lifted his soft, black curls, gave him a lordly, windswept look. Smile on his mouth, tears in his eyes, he waved. She thought he called back, "Dear Asthore!"

The sound was lost in a sudden dashing of others to the steps. Whistle of the engine. And someone calling, "All aboard! We're off! Long, long trail—"

Jackie grabbed her hand. They ran down the tracks. They made out Michael leaning from the platform, waving a gallant hand. They ran. They said, "I see him! He's stooping down! See—waving his hat!" Laughing, crying, following till they could no longer see Michael's face, but only his hand waving. Then only a blur. Michael gone!

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He wasn't kept in Vancouver. He was sent at once to Shorncliffe Downs in Kent. In April he was in France. He could not tell her where.

But she and Jackie pored over the newspapers. He told them he had seen Canadian fellows caught in the first awful gas attacks. These men arrived in England just before he was sent from Dover to the battle front. Deplorable, tortured things to see—enough to break a fellow's heart. "You see red, when you look at a sight like this, Roen!"

She wrote every day. Such long letters. He wanted to know the most trifling things—why even that Gerner brothers, the grocers, had sold out and a paint shop was now in their place in Haight street—and what movies were being shown.

He said that these letters of hers would melt the heart of death itself. So he carried them about. And pictures of herself. They were his charm. He knew they'd work.

"But you must marry me as soon as I return . . . penniless beggar though I am, Asthore . . ."

"Though you be blind and penniless and even bald, nothing shall keep me from you. Oh, I mean this, Michael. For I see so plainly now. . . . What I thought was strength was only weakness—only fear . . . I have done with it. . Just you come home . . ."

Writing to him far into many a midnight, space vanished. He was near to her—his breath on her cheek—the uplifting, solemn fervor of his lips pressing in that dear last kiss on hers.

The melting of his voice with those words that of all words ever uttered were the most piercing sweet. "You are my wife—my dear, dear wife, Asthore! And I belong to you. Remember!" The laugh on his mouth, but in his eyes, those tears.

She could not be sad remembering this. She sometimes thought: "I have too much." And she said prayers of thanks for the richness of her gifts—fearful, defensive prayers—

On the days when she expected letters she would dash through her work—the car crept so slowly—

In August—suddenly—with an abruptness that put a chill even on Jackie's infallible gaiety, Michael's letters ceased.

* * * * * * *

The second week in August a telegram came—starkly terse: "Michael Scott wounded in action."

Roen had this message stuck like a poisoned arrow in her blouse. She felt it with suffocating pain. She followed the doctor listlessly to the door. Dearie ill again—perhaps dying.

"This is too bad, Miss Ross," said the doctor, touched by Roen's desperate quiet.

"Would she be better in a hospital?"

"Well, yes—perhaps. That would be better for you; wouldn't it?"

"No. We're not busy now. I can take care of her." She had been home three days. Cheaper than a nurse. Better for her than hospital bills.

She went back and sat at Dearie's side. With her eyes closed and the dark flush on her pallid face, Dearie looked very young. They had moved her bed to the living room because this was the loveliest place in the house, with the windows on three sides, the yellow roses from the garden climbing upward to peek in, and the autumn sun bathing them with russet glow till quite late in the afternoon.

On the mantel was a picture of Bobby-dad. Dearie wanted

it there—facing her. Roen shut her eyes against her father's image—all the dreams this image awakened. They had their love!

* * * * * * *

The next mail brought a flood of letters pitching her to the verge of collapse with relief. Letters delayed—joyous letters. In one was a picture of Michael holding a little laughing boy on his shoulders.

"You see, I'm all right, Roeny. This is Stephen's lad. He looks like me and likes me."

Michael was gassed the middle of June. Weeks in the hospital. Now in Stephen's home convalescing. He felt all right, but when he asked to be sent back to his company he was denied.

"So I'm coming back, Asthore. Sooner than we dreamed!"

She was still drowned in the sweetness of this when Michael cabled from England, following this with an urgent letter. A friend of his uncle offered him a magnificent chance. He had oil lands in Venezuela. He would take Michael with him as chief engineer—pay him astonishingly. Enclosed in Michael's letter was a money-order for $500 and this summons:

"Meet me in New York. We can be married there. We'll have two heavenly weeks before I leave for South America. I won't take you with me on this first survey. It is wild, sparsely inhabited country. But by the spring I'll have the lay of the land and perhaps a home built down there and money enough for Dearie and for our Jackie's college. Then I'll ask you to come.

"Make no excuses this time, Asthore. You can give me

this little fortnight. I want to see you the moment the ship docks. Ah, to see you again!"

* * * * * * *

Jackie came to her and snapped stern, aggressive young eyes: "You're going, Ron?"

Jackie had his own ideas: his hot young resentments. One of these was against Dearie's immortal grieving.

"Ron, you're a coward if you let her stand between you now. There's no excuse for it."

She laughed because his loyalty was very precious.

She was going to Michael. Here was her life's fulfillment and here as she now saw it, a higher right.

CHAPTER XIII

October morning. Sunlit breeze flowing all about her. Sparkle in the air: radiance in her heart, Roen stood at the pier. Ships gliding down the narrows. Now, within clear view loomed Michael's boat.

As it swept to the dock the passengers stood at the rails and all the waiting ones rushed forward, trying eagerly to single out a beloved face.

Now the passengers began coming down the gangway amidst the happy hubbub of greetings, laughter. A tall lad swept in his father's arms. A little old lady embraced by her son.

Gradually the crowd thinned. Roen pushed to the gangway, nervously scanning each face as the tardy passengers filed out. She thought Michael would have been the first.

Now an old man and his wife limping past: now a girl in a wheel chair. Everybody off.

For a stricken moment, Roen stood motionless. Then she saw the young purser standing at the top of the gangway. And she ran to him, asking a little breathless and shaky: "Is everyone off?"

"All off. Did you miss your party? What was the name?"

"Michael Scott."

The young officer turned white: "Wait—come in here. Are you Miss Roen Ross? I have a message for you."

He made a sudden move to block Roen's view. But she saw and her eyes grew with terror.

From the lower deck three men pushed before them a long redwood box—a coffin.

Roen caught the purser's arm and repeated, frightened: "A message? Where is he? Take me to him!"

His face told her.

"What—what message?" she implored faintly.

"I'm sorry. He died at dawn this morning."

"Not Michael!" Her hands opposed him and her ferocious, stricken eyes. "Not Michael Scott."

"Yes."

She flung down the passage, raising her arms and stopping the men pushing the coffin. She pressed her two hands on the crude box and would not let them move.

"Let me see!"

Someone was taking her arm: someone saying close to her ear: "I have his papers—papers he wanted you to have."

She didn't listen. She stared after the coffin. Then she said softly, starkly: "It's not Michael. It couldn't be Michael!"

She turned to the purser, who was frightened, whose young face was very pale. She opened her hands in a gesture that unmanned him and asked gently: "Did you know him? Are you sure it's the same one I'm seeking and he is dead—like that?"

"He died in quarantine at dawn this morning. So we brought the body.

"He was gassed, you know and none too strong when he started. Three days out he got pneumonia. It took him in

a flash—though he thought up till yesterday that he'd win."

"You mean he knew he'd die? Wouldn't see me? Knew this?"

She listened distracted—incredulous. For all the brightness of the October morning, they stood there talking in a fog—a gray muffling fog, frightfully cold, frightfully damp: a penetrant fog that went into their mouths and into their eyes with chill, outrageous bitterness.

This purser, Kirby Mitchell, had a friendship for Michael. And when the ship's doctor became alarmed, Kirby spent all his free time with Michael.

Now, trying to tell of his friend's last conscious hour, he bit his lips and blinked and found no words.

"He was alive at dawn? This morning . . . oh as late as that?"

"Yes and holding on. Wanting to see you—even for a moment—took hold of my hand and said: 'I'll stick it out—got to see her—ONCE.' "

She leaned down and looked into the rippling water. She said to it quietly, "Gone!"

She clasped her hands against her throat and murmured in a hush, "Michael—Michael."

She smiled at things she saw in the water and whispered, "I don't believe this!" And within, her heart fell to pieces—it withered and fell apart.

The boy came and gave the papers into her hands—gave some of Michael's things—those he wanted her to have. He said gently: "Let me call a cab. If there's anything I can do—"

"Oh," said she, staring at him vaguely and smiling—staring

at the papers and turning them, "You're going back to the ship? You have work to do? I think I'll walk—"

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So she returned alone to the cottage in Oak street. And at home a terrible sense of expectance tortured her. She kept waiting.

They had lost each other in a fog. He was near, but she could not see him. He spoke. She couldn't hear. Soon the beloved hand would reach out—seize hers. The dear voice breaking with relief would cry: "Oh, it's you! There all the time? How you frightened me!" And they would laugh in the gladness of each other's arms and the folly of tears sparkling in the sunshine.

So she sought him. She murmured, "Michael, where are you?" And went fumbling, blind yet protesting into the darkness searching. Piteously, like all who have loved, she flouted death: flung off the remorseless challenge. He was not gone! Crumbled like a dry leaf to powder and blown to nothing in a wind? Oh never!

She was driven to walk. She went out swiftly to the park. The acorns were soft and crushed under her feet. There in the little grove of eucalyptus that starless night he had made her dance, bending his head down joyously and humming against her ear—crooning in a way that melted her with yearning—that made her wish to go down utterly and be lost in her love of him.

There he had held her in the shadow of the trees, raising her two hands, kissing them with a teasing, "Ah, your holy, delicate white hands, my dark Rosaleen, my own Rosaleen—"

She would come back from these visions to tell herself in

the chill quiet of many nights: "Dead. Oh, Michael, you are dead—"

She would get up and read his letters. She had found three among the papers the purser gave her. They were written when Michael was in the hospital in France when he thought his life was done. One she treasured beyond reckoning.

"If, dear one, this must be, and we are parted—do not cry so, Roen Asthore—your cries will reach across a thousand worlds and would that I can answer! Now, if any God—if any God in kindness gave me one last gift, it would be this: to comfort you. To go there where you are and lift you in my arms.

"The things that I would say, my dear life's love-words that would fill your heart with everlasting gladness. All you have meant to me. The nights when you have raised your face to mine, and I have seen it flaming in its grave, strong love. I have seen your eyes consenting and known that you were mine.

"I do not say that I will go willingly. For I will not. I would have one hour of eternal joy. Yet I have had a THING —a great and holy thing. You gave it to me, Roen. It was sweet and wondrous all these years. So do not weep for me, Roen. Or only a little. For I will like this. I will want your holy tears.

"But for you, left lonely. I've a right to cry. I do not care who knows that I have cried. That I am crying now. I would send one to you—one to comfort you. Had I a dear loved brother who was free I would bid him go to you—stay with you these few years until we meet again—until we meet again—"

Suddenly one night as she read this letter, the first complete

realization of blank, unending loss, a lifetime of it, seized her. Michael would not live again. Go where she would: reach and call, he would not answer.

She opened the door into the hall quietly—listened. She wished no one to know the freezing desperation of her grief. Then she stole from the house.

Walk swiftly—rush far from this stark vision—forget—

She plunged into the darkness of the park. She found that bench near the music stand where so often they had sat lost in the joy of each other's arms.

She sat here—listening—waiting—seeking—denying he was lost—he was never returning. Somewhere in the vast quiet Michael lived—understood, and yet so cruelly eluded her.

Then someone touched her hands. Someone put arms about her. She knew the neat, warm fingers.

"Didn't frighten you, did I, Roen? Heard you go out. Gosh, you're cold!"

She glanced a moment into Jackie's young, compassionate face, turned her own away. They sat a while in the starlit sanctuary.

Then Roen said huskily: "Jackie, you angel!" and smiled with the first tears that had softened her eyes in many days.

When she was again in her own room, she recalled the way Jackie had watched her lately: the relief that flew across his face when she talked, when she tried to laugh.

Suddenly she said: "I'm like her!" Like Dearie, saddening others with the cherishing of a life-long grief. Thinking it noble to go crying down the years. The natural way for one who loves—but the coward's way.

She sank on her knees. She prayed for courage.

CHAPTER XIV

It was Jackie who saved her. He said, one night, and for all that he tried to make the tone casual, it held a challenge: "I got a raise, Ron."

"Oh, did you? That's good."

He watched her narrowly. But she asked nothing more.

Then with a threat in eyes and voice: "Yes! And they tell me that in six months I may be chief clerk of the drug department."

"Six months? But you'll be in college by then."

"Will I?" He shrugged. This was what he wanted. Give her something big and vital to pour herself upon. Let her serve and give. Then only was she living. Then only would she save herself.

He knew her well though he was but a youth, not yet 17.

"Guess college can wait. Guess it's got to wait. Medical school costs plenty."

"So you've decided to be a chief clerk, have you? Very fine!"

"It's been sort of decided for me seeing they didn't land me here with a golden spoon."

"They landed you here with me, though— Oh, Jackie," she went up and put her hands on his shoulders and gave a catchy laugh. "I see! I see now! You'll go next semester. And I'll be the one to get the raise. The money will be earned—"

Again those warm, softening tears. She needed things to love—things to serve. She would always need these. He gave them to her.

* * * * * * *

And for the next five years she submerged her identity in Jackie's. She lived in his triumphs: she agonized with him in each young hope: whether it was the boxing bout he longed to win or the piece of research in zoology that he prayed would be awarded him.

She read deep scientific books so that she could talk with him and listen to him.

She made no effort to renew her own contacts with life. She stinted herself even in the clothes she bought, just that she might have more to give.

When he was in his Junior year she took $100 and bought a tuxedo for Jackie.

There had been one, once, who brought shimmering green silk for a dancing frock to her. And all the dear sweet things of youth, she was determined, should be given Jackie.

He protested, of course. He wanted to make his own way as much as he could. He'd never live long enough to repay Roen.

But he knew that he repaid her by the mere fact of needing her. The more he took from her the more he served her. And he was secretly overjoyed in the possession of this snappy outfit. Trust Roen to do it up brown; get the right kind of studs and the very ultra in vest and tie.

The night of the Prom, she sat on the edge of his bed fixing the shirt, watching with such a twist in her heart as he shaved. Such a little while ago he had come to her with the

down on his cheeks. He had fingered the silky hairs disgustedly, asking: "Say, Ron, you don't care if I shave, do you—won't hurt if I don't lather?" That was the day of Michael's commencement.

Jackie was like Michael now—like Michael in his bonny way—in the gallant, teasing smile.

He turned to her, sparkling: "Trousers long enough? How much of my heel shows?"

"Half an inch."

He twitched the suspenders, and as he stood before his mirror fixing his necktie as carefully as ever a girl would, he grinned at himself. Then he blushed.

Well, he looked so young—so gay and young. He was 20, and blushed, finding himself so fine.

"Pleased with yourself, lad?"

"Shouldn't I be?" He opened the door of his closet, reached down his hat. "This is a great night, Roni. Greatest of all!"

"Is she that dear?"

He shrugged into his overcoat, crimson to the ears. "Say, Ron, suppose I drop by here for a moment? Wish you could meet her. She'll never guess. Can I?"

She laughed hummingly, tears in her heart. "Oh, do that!"

He had been in love since he was 14—or earlier—since he wore his hair in the little horns on his forehead because Irma Eaves admired them. But he had never been so blushing and eager about it. He had never wanted Roen to see the girls before. She felt all through her a melting tenderness—yet she was glad.

Her face had a rapt, sweet look as she sat in the living room at her mother's feet. Dearie scarcely moved from her chair

now. Her hands were almost transparent. They twined in Roen's hair.

"You spoil him, Ronnie."

"I've been doing that a long while, Dearie, and he's good yet. So I guess it doesn't hurt."

"You drown yourself in him. You should not! You are still young yourself. He will do nothing for you. You will only lose him to another."

"He does more for me, mother. No one but he and I know what Jackie has done. And I can never lose him when he richly finds himself. I can only lose Jackie if he fails, or if he is cheated"

Something high hearted and debonair about him as he brought this dark sprite of a girl into the hall; something very gay as he looked down at her and said: "Hello, Jinny! Isn't she sweet, Ron?"

Virginia, too, was winning. She had clear, gray eyes and a very red mouth. She had an eager sweetness. When she laughed in a quick gleeful way her eyes twinkled with humor.

It was plain that she thought Jackie the handsomest and knightliest thing on the earth.

"Did you know that he's to be the belle of the ball?" she asked archly. "He certainly thinks so! I caught him strutting up and down before the mirror gazing at himself. In a trance of delight."

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Roen stood at the door; echoes of their laughter fluttered about her. She felt restless, shaken, filled with excitement.

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Very late she happened to awaken. Jackie was softly push-

ing the door of her room, listening, hoping she'd speak. Burning to hear what Roen had to say. He came in and sat on the bed. He folded his scarf and musing, let his cigarette ashes drop on the spread.

"Isn't she a dream, Ron?"

"A love—a darling."

"Did you ever see such a pretty little hand?"

"Soft as a rose!"

"Yes," he agreed seriously. "And she's awful smart, Ron Made a first grade in zoology. That's almost unheard of—"

He began enumerating Virginia's charms. She had character, she had gaiety, the quickest comeback, and gosh, what a sense of humor. But that came of the unusual life she led. Her mother died when she was only four. She and her father were chums ever since. They had wonderful times. The old man, who was a jovial fellow just a little past 50, worshiped her. He gave her $150 a month for an allowance. That would spoil many a girl. But you couldn't spoil Virginia.

Roen would have tried desperately to love any girl Jackie brought to her. But it was easy to like Virginia Holmes. They became deep friends. Roen was grateful that her successor should prove so admirable.

It was Roen who insisted on her brother's early marriage. She was almost violent in the wish for his happiness. When, in the year of Jackie's graduation, Virginia's father died, Roen made the boy see that his duty was with the girl he loved.

But he couldn't walk out now and leave Ron alone in that cottage with only Dearie. He wanted to make things up . . . give Ron her chance.

She answered stubbornly, determined on this: "How can you live my life for me, Jackie? You say I was cheated. Why cheat two more, then? That's all you'd accomplish."

She grew eloquent. Love made her so. She was recompensed when Virginia clasped her arms about Roen's neck and murmured: "No wonder he adores you! So do I, Ron!"

Roen stood up with Virginia. It was very quiet—only two friends of Virginia's and two of Jackie's.

Virginia looked wistful and brave in a pale gray dress, lilies of the valley at her belt.

They were young but they felt with a holy intensity that should not be denied. Should never be denied!

Standing in the dim church watching as in a dream, Roen saw her brother bend his dear young head as he gave the ring.

Love is always the same. So Michael had put the ruby on her finger; so he had whispered: "Blood of a heart that will never change, Asthore!"

Roen's face was white, but she felt exalted—love and cherish always— Oh, there is courage and fine high faith in this. She smiled gaily when Jackie's proud young eyes met hers.

He kissed his bride. He kissed Roen. He said: "Ron—Ron, darling!"

One of the sweetest—one of the most piercing moments in her life.

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It was quiet now in the cottage. It would be hushed in this house always.

CHAPTER XV

THE routine of her life went on with a subtle quiet—mornings of riding to the office, evenings of riding home, cooking the supper, reading to Dearie. So subtly, so quietly day followed day she was unaware of change in herself, unaware of time passing.

One day James Burton said to her abruptly: "Roen, do you ever think of me?"

She was tremendously startled. "In what way?"

"Do you think you might ever marry me?"

"Marry! Why—no—I don't think of marrying anyone." She was momentarily sickened by the shock of this prospect . . . and the assaulting images it conjured.

She refused Burton gently but without emotion.

He said quietly in a way that chilled her whenever she recalled his look and tone: "Then good-bye, Roen. I hope to heaven you'll never feel what I've felt."

He went to New York. His assistant, Gregg Morse, took his place Six months later Roen heard of his marriage. She had no regret.

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One night toward the end of November the wind hooted and a rain came in gusty sheets against the panes. Dearie stretched her thin white hands toward the fire as though she were chilled. She sat forward smiling into the flames.

"Roen, do you remember your father clearly?"

"Of course. Piercingly. I was thirteen when he died."

"How did he appear to you? Very handsome?"

"Yes—gallant. Like the pictures of King Arthur's knights riding on white steeds."

"Oh, like that? And do you remember that he cared greatly for me?"

"I remember the way you used to wait for him at the door in that flowered challis wrapper."

"I have it yet, Roen. I have it in my bureau drawer. He loved it. He liked the way the neck was cut. He used to kiss me, but you don't remember that—"

Roen laughed softly, so sharply was the picture etched on her childish mind.

"What else do you remember, Roen? You used to come stealing in and seeing us you would run over to the windows and wrap the curtains about you. But you don't remember that?"

"And that he knelt, mother, at the couch and put his arms about you. Yes—I remember that—"

Dearie drew her hands together, smiling on into the flames—drinking the words Roen said—

She breathed quickly—a glowing look in her eyes. She said suddenly: "Ronnie! What will you do alone? Left alone here—I am soon going—I know that I will soon go. . . . Oh, the relief of going at last—"

She lay back with her lips happily parted, vivid spots on her pale cheeks—vividness in her eyes—

Roen went into her mother's room a dozen times that night. Dearie slept quietly.

But in the morning she was afraid to leave her. In the evening she hurried home.

Dearie said once: "I'm very happy."

* * * * * * *

One afternoon as Roen came into the cottage Dearie lay in the antique lounging chair, sun falling on the soft burnished curls—a timid wintry sun.

As Roen came into the room she noted at once and with a strangled feeling the ripple of the old flowered challis. Dearie was dressed in that old gay wrapper that Bobby-dad had loved because it was cut low and he could kiss the warm hollow of her throat.

She was dressed in that. And she held Bobby-dad's picture in her hands.

To Roen's sharp "Dearie, Dearie, darling!" there came no answer.

Gone out to meet him—waiting for this through 17 years—gone gladly—

Roen fixed the soft curls about her mother's forehead. She robed her in lavender because this was the color Dearie loved. She wept seeing the pale face so lovely.

She was alone now. Quite alone. The whispering hush swinging from wall to wall.

Those two who had needed her were freed. And she also was freed.

But this freedom was now a tragedy. And she perceived it so.

* * * * * * *

Jackie wanted her to live with them. He begged and stormed. The young, careful companionship beguiled her, but

she was unwilling to accept spiritual dependence. She did not want to share in other lives. She wanted a life of her own —thwarted and starved, if this must be, but strong anyway and her own.

She remained at the cottage. She shrank from its echoes, its emptiness and its quiet. Day after day—year after year. Forbidding prospect.

She closed her thought to the future and went plunging into hectic activity. She swam: she played golf: she read all manner of books. She gardened. She bought expensive theater tickets and treated the girls in the outer office. To these girls, Roen was an immense personality, highly paid and free to leave any afternoon by four o'clock. She was handsome, breezy, full of color. Living alone in that cosy bungalow: come and go as you please! Riding in taxis—no one to criticize. They envied her.

It soothed Roen's pride to give out this impression. But she did not fool herself. Love had brought the dream of a rich, full life: the dream of a child. Michael's death definitely blotted out these hopes, but it did not end her hungers. She ached perpetually with loneliness and longing.

Sometimes she would say aloud: "Thirty—nearly thirty-one." The thought became terror. Years closing in. Chance for love, home, child vanishing. Life running away. Forty —she would be alone always.

She would find the cottage unbearable and would rush into the garden, banging the door. Or, she would go to Jackie's house, steeping herself in its happy contacts. There were always two or three young doctors or students here. Roen, excited by the glow, the friendliness, the mere joy of company

would astonish and delight them with her feverish intensity. She would sometimes bring half a dozen, sometimes only one home with her for dinner.

Sitting by the fire she would think: "How pleasant—how satisfying."

And after the company was gone, she stood in her room gazing at the old snap-shots, giving way to storm and regret. She would admit her unappeasable yearnings.

In February, three months after Dearie's death, the inevitable happened.

The office was reorganized. Roen was called in to assist the new attorney who was now head of the claims department.

He was sitting at a desk. As she entered, he rose. He came forward and said with a smile: "Glad to meet you, Miss Ross."

She experienced a shock. The eyes looking into hers were blue and wistful. They were Michael's eyes. And they dwelt again quietly on hers.

Hers widened. They were fixed in utter astonishment.

Almost with a gasp of relief she was noting his hair, soft and black. But not springing full and thick in wind-swept curls from the temples. No—mercifully, a line of pain, a sparse look over Mark Conrad's forehead.

"Will you help me, Miss Ross, with this Burns affair?"

"Oh that? Mr. Morse told me it was the Symonds' case you wanted. I'll get the data."

She almost rushed to the door, so great was her turmoil and so fortunate the chance for a momentary escape.

For four months, Roen was thrown daily into the company

of this man whose eyes were the living eyes of Michael: whose hair was soft and black and whose very manner of talking recalled her early love.

With an anticipation half dread, half longing she found herself waiting each day for Mark's summons. At first, merely that she might trace these similarities, lulling herself in a dream emotion.

But at the end of four months, when they had exchanged opinions on books, on golf, even on love, Roen was no longer dwelling on dream images. She was feeling the pressure of Mark's hand, seeing the boyish sweetness in his eyes, hearing a sudden wistful overtone that crept now and then into his voice. She was thinking of him continually.

So that she grew afraid when she now found him leaning across his desk, compelling her with a sudden question to meet his eyes: or when he would appear on Saturday afternoons on the golf course and casually take a place at her side.

"I must end it," she whispered to herself.

"End what?" her heart countered.

Distracted, she would go to Jackie's: absorb herself in Jackie's baby. The little girl, named for Roen, was but a few months old. It would put its small, soft hand on her cheek. For hours after, she would feel the silken pressure. One night when she was caring for the baby, when she was holding its face, a brief moment, against her neck, she thought abruptly: "This is what I need."

In the middle of June, Roen's cousin, Evelyn Mullins, became ill. She sent for Roen asking her to give up her vacation and take care of the three little children. Evelyn was going to the hospital in the month of August for her fourth.

She was despondent and terribly rebellious. She said she would die and the baby would die with her. She would not have the child! They had barely enough with the three. They would be poverty-stricken with this fourth. The whole family would be doomed.

Said Roen: "Give the new baby to me."

In a wild eagerness, she now looked forward to the coming of this child, which at the moment of birth would become her child.

She mentioned her plan to Jackie. He grew furious.

"You can't do this ghastly thing! Deliberately shutting out the possibility of marriage: deliberately giving up the hope for a child of your own. Oh Ron! And what do you get out of it? It can never be YOUR child. For all the adoption in the world it will still have the chromosomes of that ribbon-clerk Mullins!"

"What makes you think there is any chance of marriage for me or of a child of my own?"

He looked at her angrily: "Do you mean that you are determined to refuse life? That you are going to hang on to what's finished?"

"I don't think I ever made such a decision, even subconsciously. I'm only stating the facts. In seven years I've not met anyone and sometimes I've been lonely enough. Sometimes I've wanted company. But all the world, Jackie, seems younger than I. And all the world is settled but I! Under different circumstances, I might have married. Taking things as they are, do you see any likelihood of my life changing? I don't."

She stood at the door after Jackie was gone, recalling the

words that had come so abruptly to her lips— "Under different circumstances I might have married."

She trembled because of the image that accompanied them. Eyes looking into hers wistfully, sweetly as Michael's had looked—the eyes of Mark.

She could scarcely wait for August. The child would make her safe from all these futile storms.

CHAPTER XVI

MARK was curious about Roen. He was exorbitantly curious. A proud, beautiful girl, vital as flame, and yet shut off from the world of youth. Living in a peculiar, self-sufficient isolation. Why?

One Saturday, he overtook her as she was hurrying down Montgomery street. "Playing golf this afternoon?"

"No—buying toys."

Her face had an excited look with a flutter of red-brown hair in her eyes—a kind of radiance and sparkle about her.

"For whose kids?"

"My cousin's."

He followed her to the five-and-ten where she made innumerable purchases until she had a big shopping bag filled.

"Will you spend the whole afternoon taking care of them?" he asked mystified.

"Oh, the week-end—give them a relief from their mother. Children need escape even more than husbands."

"And will you enjoy this peculiar pastime—playing nurse to your cousin's children?"

She gave a quick, evasive chuckle. "Yes, I'll love it. I've always been nurse to someone or other and I've always adored kids. I'd like to have money enough to gather in all the unwanted babies in the world and create the perfect environment for them."

"Roen," said he, coolly, "why do you not marry and have children of your own?"

"That's so unnecessary! We've more than we provide for as it is!"

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He asked Gregg Morse how long Roen had worked for the company.

"Since she was a mere youngster—about 17 when she came. Been here 14 years now."

Mark was staggered. He fancied Roen about 25. Then Gregg Morse told him her tragic romance. . . . Roen waiting on the pier for her lover. . . .

"Long ago?"

"Yes—seven years."

"She'd known him some time?"

"Oh—all her life—a first affair—I think that was the way of it. Anyway they worshiped each other. He used to meet her here, often on Fridays. All the time he was at college. A handsome lad. She's never got over it. . . . She's that way—all or nothing—"

Mark sat at his desk after Morse was gone. He thought of the man Roen had loved and the way she had loved him. His breath choked on the thought of love like this—wild, tender, beautiful—love that pours itself out in a splendor of abandon.

The kind of a love he had once thought his— The kind of love a woman like Roen could know—

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As Mark came into his bedroom that evening and saw his dinner clothes laid out, he gave a disgruntled: "Hell."

He crossed to his wife's room: "Where are we going?"

Claire Conrad was buttoning her slipper. As she stooped over, her kimono dropped, revealed the abbreviated chiffon step-in. She turned scarlet and said sharply: "I've asked you to knock."

"After thirteen years of marriage—" Mark laughed and finished with a crude but very comical remark that gave himself a moment of delicious satisfaction and caused Claire to say in a wounded tone: "You have no reverence."

He regarded her wistfully, repeating a line he had found particularly apt in a recent novel: "I'm still hopeful and reverence, you know, only goes to passion's funeral."

She regained the kimono—a pastel thing, dove-gray, the color of her eyes. The flush lingered in her cheeks.

He thought suddenly and said aloud: "You haven't changed a bit, Claire. You're just the same as you were 13 years ago."

"But you've changed."

"I'm no longer 18 or 20 if that's what you want."

"But won't you please be agreeable tonight? You can't have forgotten! It's Laura's and George's anniversary—their tin wedding."

He groaned. "Why must people celebrate their blunders? Why must we participate?"

Her large appealing eyes widened. She turned her back and ran the buffer over her nails. In the mirror he saw her chin quiver, and was sorry.

He prepared, though still resentfully, for the waste of his evening.

* * * * * * *

Laura Thompson was Claire's closest friend. She had married wealth and liked entertaining in showy, elaborate dinners.

All the men in the set were successful in business: all the women attended lectures given by a clever member of their sex who in an hour, delivered to them, predigested, the latest in world culture and politics. Whereupon they all became offensively brilliant and launched into glib discussion of the most profound subjects. It was all right until you'd heard the same remark from two or three of the ladies in succession.

Mark Conrad, lawyer by profession, student by nature, and cynic for the fun of it, hated their sham and had not always the grace to conceal his feelings.

Tonight there were twenty guests. He noticed the table cloth, rose satin with some filmy gauze over it.

Tomorrow Laura would hurry downstairs and carefully go over it, looking for holes burned by hot cigarettes. How often he had come upon Claire, after their dinner parties, in tears because of the brown smoke burns. But she went on buying expensive, embroidered linens: went on weeping over their destruction. It was part of woman's mania, so he figured, to clutter up life with these costly, but inherently shoddy superfluities.

Laura had large, china blue eyes and an impressive voice. She craved a "high-brow" atmosphere at her parties and now, though the guests were all whanging tin wedding bells and calling toasts to the ten-year bride and groom, she managed to lead the talk to a discussion of recent literature.

Someone mentioned "Cytherea."

"I'll admit I enjoyed it. I went on an emotional debauch," calmly announced Ethel Durant, a fairish matron with a vapid look. She thought her remark sensational and fancied it cata-

logued her as a bizarre, colorful woman with mysterious sex appeal.

"It was written to shock," Laura pronounced. "It is utterly without purpose."

"On the contrary," said Mark, "the book is a profound analysis of a human mood. It's a searching study of love and man's pathetic attitude toward the great emotion"

"Why call the attitude pathetic? The hero is a libertine and his attitude to love is merely licentious."

"The hero is by no means a libertine. He is a fervent idealist . . . a man of forty who still believes immortal love possible. So he goes on a quest for the divine passion. Surely pathetic enough. An intelligent man who thinks that love can retain its first wild sweet flavor when sandwiched in with the bread and butter of life."

The faces of several wives turned indignantly red.

"Do you mean," said Laura, suavely, "that love can't survive matrimony?"

"Do you justify," cut in another, "the man who runs away from wife and children because he is such an idealist that he must find the love which has eluded him?"

As usual in all discussions of love, the women became personal and excited. They lined up on one side stalwartly for monogamy: for ruthless, even if destituting, fidelity. They took it as a slur on their charms as wives that anyone should question the glowing success of marriage.

Far down the table Mark saw his wife—her face flushed, regarding him with wounded indignation. He was glad to withdraw from the now babbled discussion.

Driving home, Claire remained silent. He watched her as

she quietly entered their room. He could tell from the way she slipped the rings from her fingers that she was angry with him. She kept her eyes down and her mouth, which was very expressive, with a certain childlike appeal, firm.

He knew she was aching to talk so he said amiably: "Why so downcast?"

"If you had to belittle love, you might have used better taste than to do it at a tin wedding. You all but said you were tired of me!"

She cried readily, but he could never bear to see her tears. He went over and took her hand: "Don't be silly! What would a dinner party be without an argument? You shouldn't begrudge me a little fun when you force me to these fool celebrations."

"You seemed to enjoy yourself."

"You wanted me to, didn't you? Isn't that why we went?"

"You weren't required to dance four times in succession with the youngest girl in the party."

"Don't exaggerate . . . twice."

"And flirting with her the way you did."

He laughed. "Dancing and flirting thirteen years, but true to you yet." He was now amused and asked teasingly: "Are you afraid. Claire, of my potential infidelities?"

"I wouldn't for a moment dishonor you by even supposing you capable of treachery."

"Don't get insulting, my dear. The only husband incapable of infidelity is the dead husband."

She went over to the bureau, put her wrist watch in a small box. "Why do you always speak flippantly of sacred things? Why need you have talked as though you were disappointed in

love? You actually suggested that you approve of infidelity. You think it justifiable."

"Not justifiable. Understandable. Why, my dear, it's even conceivable that you might find yourself in circumstances where the company of another man would become fascinating. Even YOU might warm to a sufficiently potent charm. Imperceptibly, of course. First, you would be interested in his conversation and noble bearing. Gradually in his way of looking at you intently. Then you would thrill to his appreciation of your delicacy. And always his reverential attitude—"

Claire gave him a look of scarlet indignation, grabbed her kimono and went in a little wounded rush to her dressing room. He could flippantly picture her falling in love with another man. Could profane her with this thought and jest about it.

She would have a cry; carefully remove traces of tears; come back quietly. Remote, as though she were alone on a desert island, she would get into bed, lying motionless with her hands crossed on her breast.

He picked up a book and read a few pages, but he was thinking of Claire in there crying. Why was she hurt? Because he no longer cherished starry illusions of their love? Was this his fault?

He remembered his early dream of marriage as an ever-deepening, ever more complete and splendid meeting of hearts and spirits. They had married in this imperious young expectance.

How lovely she had appeared to him then; how her sweet, virginal quality had ravished his heart, filling him with undreamed-of tenderness. And his horror when he perceived that Claire secretly thought him a person of gross and discred-

itable instincts; that she cherished her own lack of fire as an intrinsic chasteness.

Her reticence then shamed all his fine and beautiful feeling. He felt bitterly and resentfully the taint of mere acquiescence in their relation. He was violently wounded; the element of beauty which he craved piercingly in his emotions vanished.

He took refuge in flippance. And Claire, because she did not know what he resented; because she was fundamentally tepid, considered him sacrilegious. He was always hurting her—

An hour after she had turned out the light at her bed, she still lay with her hands crossed—her eyes shut—yet rigidly awake.

He was aware of this. He could see in imagination her fingers—long and slender. All her bones were long but very delicate. In the same way, though she was tall, she gave the impression of littleness. He leaned down and said: "Claire—I'm sorry. I was talking for the fun of it. Don't lie awake grieving."

"But you speak as though you aren't happy."

"I am happy. Don't cherish it up against me that I happened to say an unfortunate thing."

"Are you really happy, Mark?"

"Of course."

"Are you saying it because you don't want me to lie awake? Saying it to please me?"

"No, I'm saying it because it's true."

He meant this. He was successful. He had many inner resources. And happiness, like the poet's gift, is inborn—a quality of the spirit.

One is happy or not happy just as one is blue-eyed or black. Extrinsic facts accentuate the inner state as sunlight brings out but doesn't create the colors in a pretty woman's hair. A capacity for joy is this radiant birthright. In the same way others have an inherent aptitude for sorrow. Give them plenty of cause for lamentation and they experience spiritual satisfaction.

Mark Conrad belonged to the happy species.

When Claire slept he stole to the living room and lit a fire. Claire's delicate personality pervaded the chaste, austere room. He stuck his feet to the fenders and thought, whimsically: "What an inexplicable institution is marriage!"

CHAPTER XVII

The hills were an old gray purple blurring rapidly into a moody sky. And the fog hanging low all day now trailed the golf course.

Roen stood at the ninth hole and thought regretfully: "I'll have to quit now."

She picked up her bag. Someone fell in step beside her . . . Mark.

"Beautiful drive you made there."

"Glad you saw it. I may never do so neatly again. Were you playing?"

"Just arrived. The fog beat me to it. Let's go and have a cup of tea."

They went swinging down the slope. Their feet made light, sopping sounds on the moist earth. She felt hilarious and thought the fog, now swirling about them, beautiful.

They sat at a tea table in the club house.

"Where will you go on your vacation, Roen? You'll have a regular orgy of golf? A game every day?"

"Yes—but not golf. I'm staying in town this year. I'm taking charge of my cousin's children."

"For the whole month?"

"Worth it," said she and with a gay laugh leaned across the table. "The new baby will be mine from the minute it arrives. I'm taking it for keeps."

"What do you mean? Why should you take your cousin's child?"

She explained.

There rose in him a strange indignation. Why in the world should she adopt some other woman's child?

With her cheeks blooming, the silky red-brown eye-brows giving such warm color to her look, he became excited with the enigma she presented.

Suppose she was thirty: suppose she had lost her first love tragically: suppose all this, yet here she was tingling with exuberant vital ardor. How did it chance that she regarded herself finished emotionally?

Surely she had rich capacities! It made his heart thump considering this.

He reached over and touched her hand, forcing her eyes to his: "Roen you shouldn't do this thing! This is a frightful thing for you to do!"

"Why?"

"It's wrong. It's offensive. That is—for you. Can't you see it as evasion—a weak, paltry evasion? You won't be any happier. This isn't what you want!"

She smiled wearily: "No—but what I want is past. I'm not fooling myself. I don't think I'm reaching the full life, the right and finest life. But I'm not evading. I need something to serve—to care for—to love. I'm taking the realest substitute I can find."

"But you're too young to take this drastic step. You may surely marry. How can you be so sure on this point?"

She found her eyes helpless in the gaze of his.

"How can you be sure? Roen—you could love!"

She remained mute, her lips faintly trembling.

"You think all this is finished for you? But why is a love lost through death so immortal? Why does it hold the spirit any more than a love lost in the wear and tear of life?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because it retains its beauty in our imagination. Perhaps because it remains the dream."

She raised her glass and took a long draught of the icy water. "Mark, you speak as though one had only to decide: 'Tomorrow I shall find a magnificent love,' and it would be granted. Just as one might decide: 'Tomorrow I shall buy a new pair of shoes.'

"Perhaps some have this facility of the heart. I haven't. I might even have fought against a second love. But I didn't have to. No second love came to me."

"Because you were shut off from all contacts. You were so busy letting other people have your life. Otherwise a love would inevitably have come to you, Roen."

"Oh Mark—do those who lose their first love through the wear and tear of life, readily meet the second great emotion? Do they go out on the highroad and straightway find the exquisite second mate?"

He followed each movement of her lips. He sated his eyes on the beauty of her face The excitement he had tried to ignore all this past week now dominant. He though of Roen associated with himself.

And he saw a flash into his own life—the first love long, long vanished. No substitute—no thought of substitute. Till now. He listened, stifled.

"How many complete and sweeping emotions does the average person know? I don't mean passing affairs that may be

enthralling for an hour or a month. I mean an emotion that fires heart and soul and body. May one know such a power upon them twice?"

She felt a faintness as he leaned across the table: as he answered hoarse, abrupt: "Yes—they may know it twice!"

Roen gazed at the candlelight wavering in the glass of water. She did not wish to meet the burning blue of his eyes.

"Well, then I'll agree—the capacity for love doesn't die with the loss of its object. But the capacity isn't enough. There must also be the certain Being. And for me there is no such Being now available."

She reached for her gloves.

He remained sitting even after she rose. He watched her hand with its fine, ardent fingers pressed against the table. He was saying to himself: "I love her— Oh my God, I love her!"

At her door he said: "Your vacation starts Monday? Then I won't see you for a month? And by that time you'll have taken the child?"

She gave a laugh: "You'd think I was taking the small-pox! It's not tragedy, Mark—it's salvation—fun, security, peace. Comfort and company for my lonely years—not so far distant after all!"

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He reached his own house with the peculiar sensation that it no longer belonged to him: that it was unreal and utterly apart. The same peculiar notion obsessed him as he sat at the table with Claire and the Martins who were their guests.

He scarcely listened to Pearl Martin as she prattled on and on. They were going to Europe. Now why couldn't he and Claire join them? They were so congenial.

He answered charmingly—agreeing, applauding, not knowing exactly what he said so busy was he with images in his mind.

"How wonderful he is tonight," Claire thought happily. "If he'd only be agreeable like this always."

She moved about the living room after the Martins were gone. She plucked withered leaves from the roses.

"Did you mean what you said, Mark? We may join them on the European trip?"

"European trip? Oh—oh yes—that would be fine." He closed his book with a snap: "Do you want to go, Claire?"

"Alone?"

"Have to be that way. I can't leave now with the Jepson and Andrews case involving millions—but if you're really eager about it—"

He saw that she was on fire with anticipation. She had been dreaming of this trip. He toyed with the idea. He got up and stretched, ignoring the racing of his pulse. Claire going off to Europe . . . he left here alone—ALONE.

"Go, if you want—why shouldn't you—years before I'll have the time—"

The prospect kept him awake that night. Several nights.

"Would you really not mind?" Claire insisted. "It would be selfish. I'd be gone eight months—maybe longer."

He laughed: "You're wild to go. It's settled!"

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He lavished money on Claire: told her to buy everything

she wanted. The day of her departure Mark crossed the bay to the train with her.

She sat with her soft, delicate hand in his. Little hand of a child that had once so stirred him. It left him cold now.

He said: "How much will you miss me?"

She answered solemnly: "A great deal."

But as the train drew in and he was helping her on, her cheeks became prettily red, her eyes sparkled. She said gaily: "Isn't this wonderful! If you were only coming along, Mark!"

He thought with flashing insight: "You don't quite mean that, Claire. You'd like to. But you don't. Life will be pleasanter for you without a husband."

She kissed him. She ran back to the steps to call softly: "Mark—I forgot to tell you. When you need anything, look in my cedar chest. . . . I've stocked it with a young haberdashery. Don't forget!"

All that afternoon as Mark worked he thought of his wife with the worried pucker on her firm, childlike mouth. He had sent her from him. He had no right to do this.

Two or three days passed. He no longer questioned. He went about with an exultant sense of freedom, feeling himself young and unwontedly glad.

As he swung along Montgomery street he could have laughed gaily at the pretty eyes meeting his—laughed in the mere exuberance of living.

He said once to himself: "As though I've been in cold storage for the last decade and am just getting warmed to life again."

He thought of Roen with exultance. He said: "I love her!"

And saying this, felt a thrilled expansion in heart and soul—an awakening to pagan joyousness.

He loved Roen. With a love different from his boyhood emotion. A complete and desperate love with all the forces of his nature marshaled, fighting violently for survival. A love that filled him with revolt; with scorn and fury for the death-in-life of the past thirteen years.

Love that swept over him in potent and tragic resurgence of youth. Arousing him to joy; to tenderness, to humility, to the thundering exultant beauty that is Life.

CHAPTER XVIII

ROEN extended her vacation. Two months since Mark had seen her. Whenever he phoned, she evaded.

But she had the child now and it was in the cottage with her.

He wanted to see her. Imperiously wanted this. He sat at his desk and visualized a child in Roen's arms.

Suddenly he recalled information Roen possessed on the Jepson case. He would make an excuse of this and call on her.

She was surprised to see him. She found herself laughing in joy.

"You have the baby here?"

"Hush! Yes," she answered, radiant.

"You're glad? No regrets yet?"

"Only had it two weeks. I left it in the hospital for the first six. It's like a gorgeous new toy. I've got such a warm, possessive, full feeling. Oh Mark, it's going to be royal fun watching it grow up—learning to laugh, to talk, to think. It's like when Jackie was little and I took care of him—all alone. I was always happy then. Always content."

"Children usually are!" he thought moodily, following her to the living room. Just as he fancied, the table was set for one, flowers of orange and purple.

He went over and took a piece of toast. Suddenly he drew up a second chair and asked in a winning, boyish way: "Let

me stay, Roen? I don't want to go down town tonight. I don't want to eat alone. Let me stay and talk with you?"

"Nothing but canned raviolas to eat."

"I love them!"

She went swiftly to the kitchen. She felt like bursting into song . . . high-flung, radiant song.

Mark walked about the room, now studying the ivory figure of an old Chinese flute-player done with great finesse: now noting the flame reflected in a copper kettle: all the warm, splashy color of the room.

Before shelves of books he loitered. He picked up a volume—Schnitzler's "Home-coming of Casanova."

"How comes this here, Roen? Is it good?"

"It's well done but devastating realism. I found it odious but then the old age of a Casanova would be."

"Why? Because he breaks the moral law and is bound to pay?"

"No—because he has outlived his quality. A man who is irresistible to women or a woman who has the face of Helen should both die before forty. Nothing could be more repellant than the husk of a woman's beauty, unaware that it is a husk, unless it be the husk of a man's passion."

Mark grinned: "So you'd damn Casanova on the ground of senility: not on the charge of immorality? You'd execute the man when he can no longer sin exquisitely?"

"An offense that merits death. But morality has nothing to do with the Casanova type. You may ask a man to conform to a rule that kills his personality. But you needn't expect him to comply. The Casanovas don't."

"We could all demand special dispensation on the plea that morality brings death to the spirit."

"No! True morality must sponsor life and inner joyousness. A code that leaves us arid mentally or spiritually: that takes all the warmth and sweetness from our days: that asks us, though pulsating with life, to sit in the dark lest we sin by feeling the sunlight—such a code is evil no matter how many times you label it 'good'.

"Did you see 'Rain'? Nothing could be more unrighteous than the Reverend Davidson's morality. Where there isn't beauty and spontaneity, there can't be rightness."

They sat before the fire and argued gaily. She was astonished at the high flow of her spirit; astonished to find Mark seething with all those mental unrests she fancied peculiar to a man under 30—a young man who has not yet found himself: who longs in one mood to emulate Don Juan and in the next to be the Messiah.

Mark was this young—unsettled and seeking. He was not arrogant like the young doctors she met at Jackie's: not dauntless as Michael. But wistful as Michael had grown in the later years of waiting.

She thought: "Why do I afflict myself thinking they are alike?" She glanced at Mark's face and found his eyes turned with question and yearning to hers.

Swiftly she stirred the fire, feeling the flame no redder than her face. "They are alike!" she admitted with hot anguish, "Oh God, terribly alike!"

And Mark thought: "I shall never dare tell her. She would send me away. She would never see me again."

He asked to see the child upon which she would lavish all her tumultuous feeling.

A little thing with big dark eyes and a mop of golden curls. It smiled and seemed looking straight at Roen.

She touched its fingers. "It's only eight weeks old, Mark —smiling already."

He noticed the beautiful, almost holy glow on her face and felt humble.

He had appeased his longing to talk with her: to sit watching her vivid face. Only to be stricken with despondence. He was bound, and she was unassailable.

Home again, he walked restlessly back and forth in his chaste, formal living room. He kicked over the rug and thought: "Gray, colorless thing! Anemic thing!"

Roen's phrase returned: "The code is evil that compels us when pulsating with life, to sit in the dark—"

His mind went back over the thirteen years of his married life—especially the latter seven. He had a mingled sense of shame and outrage.

Suddenly he recalled Claire's wounded looks after some random flirtation. He appeased her with the bleak cynicism which she quite missed: "I do it, Claire, to find out if I'm still alive."

He knew that he was alive now—trenchantly alive. Powerless against a flood-tide sweeping his vague resistance as leaves on a beach.

He wished to be powerless. He had to see Roen: had to look now and then in her warm, beautiful eyes.

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She returned to work, leaving a nurse with the baby. Mark summoned her for conferences on any excuse. He learned when she left her office and fell in step at her side.

She came to expect these meetings: to hunger for them.

At night when she combed out her hair, Michael's picture confronted her. She looked at it quietly, denying that she was seeing a resemblance that made her heart ache and flame. But she saw it and dwelt on it and traced it with a feverish, ever-heightening rapture.

Mark saw by the light that would cross her face, by the joy in her eyes, that she cared.

The knowledge was elixir poured in his veins. He could awaken love in that great, passionate heart. He could claim her and hold her.

He sat in his deserted home, consumed with flaming pictures. Her hair drawn softly to that coil at her neck, her tawny brows, long and silky, and her lowered eyes. All the wealth and passion of her heart waiting. For him!

The belief that Roen guessed and might even share his feeling whipped it to a terrible, thrilled intensity. Nothing existed but this engulfing emotion—this and the hope that she would meet it. The love he had a whole lifetime dreamed about made mightily his.

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Roen grew afraid of her emotion. More than ever she clung to the child. She needed it!

She would steal in and watch it as it slept. Getting so rosy now. She would let its soft fingers grip on hers. She uttered prayers of devotion to it—prayers against herself. Prayers that denied imploringly the want of her heart for its mate.

When the baby was four months old it became ill. It cried in the night. Roen went to it. It was soothed when she held it in her arms but when she laid it down, it cried out in pain. So she held it and comforted it all of one night. And all of that night its hot, soft cheek pressed against her throat.

After this she loved it. She could have wept recalling the appeal of the little warm body clinging to hers.

It recognized her: it laughed when she came into the room. It was nearly five months old, an adorable small person, when the mother came, demanding it back.

They had come into a little money: things were easing up: they could take care of their child.

"You don't blame me, Ron, for wanting my son—my own child."

"You can't have him!" said Roen, whiter than a ghost. "No, you can't see him! He's not here." She put up both hands and literally shoved Evelyn Mullins down the hall. "Go away! Billie is mine!"

Shaken from head to foot, she called Mark to the house.

"But the law is on their side, Roen. You can take it to court."

"I will fight! With every weapon! I will win!"

"You will not win. The parents are always favored, now especially that they have the means. Roen, you will have to give the boy back."

"I can't do it. Oh God—monstrous—" She went over and leaned against the mantel and covered her face with her hands. The long, flowing lines of her figure that always so moved him now seemed rippling with beauty and a divine heart-breaking tenderness.

He came and held her in his arms. He kissed her and begged huskily: "Let me help you bear it. Roen, let me come and help you."

* * * * * * *

Frank Mullins came with a court order and got his son. The little boy clung to Roen. He screamed in terror. They had to tear his hands from her dress.

She sat before the chill fire-place staring at old embers. She neither read nor thought.

Nights and nights of a blank, dark apathy.

Days at the office when she didn't concentrate. Gregg Morse recalling her. Embarrassed by the necessity of rousing her.

Saturdays she went to Jackie's. She took care of the little girl. She held it and felt herself a huge sponge that might absorb the child, so terrible and consuming was her emotion.

She remembered what Jackie had once said: "It's a damn shame, Ron—you should be caring for a child of your own—not mine."

She walked home early one evening. Through the park. Inhaling the pungence of eucalyptus.

When she reached the house she felt weak. She stood at the foot of the stairs, staring at the quiet windows. Quiet now always. She thought stilly— "I won't endure it—I can no longer endure it—"

She stood at the cottage steps. Early evening this Saturday in January, with the air pungent, invigorating, sweet; the young grass all dewy; fresh leaves on the lilac tree—curled, tender leaves.

Suddenly, with furious shame, she recalled her recent failings at the office. Gregg Morse rousing her to attention.

She thought, scarlet with indignation: "I'm pathetic! He thinks I'm pathetic."

She flung back her head and walked up the steps, brusquely turning her key in the latch. She was shaking—blazing with defiant resolution. She WOULD NOT be pitied!

She went directly to the room where Billie had slept, switched on the light, ruthlessly surveyed the empty space. Close it up definitely. Go out and lock the door on it. Lock all old doors.

She turned the lock in the door—snapping it.

Soon she had a fire blazing—a great stack of books set before her. She did all these things with an ominous feeling of suspense; of things that would happen no matter what wild gestures against them she might make.

Shadows went back and forth over the wall: fleet, eerie shadows like the dream-children in Kipling's "They."

She had not read the story in years but she now thought of the tragic woman who peopled her home with shadow children. Roen got up abruptly, switched on a blaze of lights. No shadows now.

She walked back and forth restlessly. Eight o'clock—nine.

The bell— She flew to answer it. She said—a sudden radiance in her face: "Mark! I thought you weren't coming!"

He caught her look and stood a moment wordless, his hands clasping hers.

This made him seem boyish, his head lowered so.

"Come in," she said gaily. "You were wise waiting. I've the fire made and all the chores done. There, sit in the big chair—I was just about to turn it to the wall, not liking the emptiness!"

She talked feverishly—stimulating him—firing him.

Glow on her face—warmth in her eyes.

She told him she thought of buying a roadster—the idea had just come to her. And she would dash about the continent, become a gay cosmopolite . . . perhaps end up at Monte Carlo and gamble all her money away—all her three or four thousand dollars.

He perceived her excitement. Suddenly it ebbed. Suddenly she listened in a dreaming quiet to his voice. In a dreaming quiet she watched him as he knelt and stirred the fire.

She thought—her heart shaking: "How kind he is! How fine he is!"

And with a stillness she leaned down and touched his shoulder; she put her hands in his: "Mark," she said smiling: "I'm glad you're here. Do you know the ghosts that came into this room before you arrived? I was remembering that terrible story—Kipling's 'They.' Mark, what am I going to do—Mark—when you go?"

He looked up into her face now so intent, so beautiful, and was drawn to her with a longing that tore through him like a sob.

He said paling—hoarse! "When I go, Roen? I'm not going."

"Oh, of course! All things vanish." She kept smiling. . . . But it's been nice having you—you said you wanted to help—you have—"

"Roen," said he, drawing her to him—holding her! "I love you! Roen, you need things to love, you say. Take me—Roen—to fill your heart."

CHAPTER XIX

Roen listened rapt to his voice in her ears, hearing in it the murmur of dreams. The suppressed dreams of a lifetime bursting in a flood on her thought.

And she knew now that from the first moment when she looked in Mark's eyes and found them holding hers wistfully with that touch of boyish sweetness; found them recalling to her those dear other eyes, from that moment she had been awaiting this.

Her spirit ran yearningly to the flame and sweetness.

And for him nothing existed—nothing had worth but her and his overwhelming love of her.

She stood motionless in his arms—listening. Yet all along she had known. She had prayed against the wild borning of this second love within her . . . whose coming left her mute; choked with mingled anguish and a strange, sad joy.

She went over and stood against the mantel and put her hand over her face. Calling to him with the appeal and grace of her downcast head, the burnished hair in that soft coil at her neck.

"What have I done?" thought he in fear. And went over softly and took her hand.

And immediately was murmuring again—was fired again. He loved her. He could not help this. He needed her—wanted her.

She turned a face that was pale, excessively pale, to his.

"Are you angry? Are you hurt? Roen—"

"No," said she, not looking at him, trembling because of the break in his voice. "Ah—Mark—no—"

And suddenly she went up smiling, took his face in her hands, looked a long, long while smiling into his eyes—then kissed him.

He felt worshiping—filled with humility and adoration as though it were an angel taking his hand, walking with him down the dim hall, standing at the door in the moonlight—soft spring moonlight, bidding him good night.

She came back to the living room and walked about with swift, light steps. Now and then she clasped fervent hands against her lips.

He loved her—needed her. He had knelt at her fire, stirring it. But it was she who leaned down and put her hands in his. She closed her eyes, flushing with bewildered joy.

* * * * * * *

Now when he waited for her in the evenings; when he followed her to the dim hall and closed his arms about her, asking for her love, she tried to avoid his eyes. Yet sought them with a helpless longing—feeling her heart and all its aching want a call to him.

And when they went for a ride and he would touch her hand and say swiftly: "Roen, look at that!" earth and sky would flame with beauty. Spring was coming with a buoyant gaiety that hurt her spirit—a tender, assailing loveliness that filled her heart, yet made her long to weep.

All her moods were thus intensified. Laughter came rapidly to her lips—and her work was a joy . . .

"Right back in your old stride again, Roen," said Gregg Morse one afternoon after he'd dictated hours and found all the letters perfect to the last detail.

He signed his name neatly. "You've tossed these off at lightning speed. I believe you could win a record."

"Work is easy," said she, gaily. She had a sense of power—of supreme, abounding vitality. A feeling of embracing sympathy—of love that had in it no taint of self pity; no warped, resentful sadness. The kind of love that made her smile happily and pause for a moment's greeting with the janitress as she came down the hall shoving her rack of brooms and mops.

A love that made her see in each raucous, freckled little newsie a comical, dear, delightful sprite.

She wished to share a brimming, sad, overbearing gladness that she now felt with each breath she drew.

She was grateful to Mark for the love he offered her. She would have taken it—in her heart she wished to take it. But no—she could not—she could not—

He went away for a week. She was desolate. She shut out the thought of his permanent loss with a blind desperation. She could not return to the stark, cold emptiness.

She was beside herself with gaiety when he was again overtaking her—when he came with swift, boyish step to her side, clasping her arm, saying eagerly: "Roen—Roen loveliest—"

One Saturday she went with him to play golf. He watched as she swung her club, profile turned toward him: strength, beauty, warmth in the glowing features; strength, passion, tenderness in the gracious flow of her long, supple body.

He went up and took the bag from her, touching her hands.

He said softly, lowering his head, shaken: "Roen—you're—too beautiful!"

Whenever he walked with her now on the golf course and chanced to see the sweet, trembling radiance in her eyes, he was filled with exorbitant longing, exorbitant tenderness. She seemed so young. And he wanted to make up to her for those lost years. Give her back the wild, singing beauty—make all her heart break into music.

He was tormented with the resistless impulse to urge: "Roen, come away with me. Roen, take me!"

He did not know how his life was to be swept clean of its chains. But it would be. Must be! Roen was his mate.

Thirteen years he had suffered hunger. He wanted love, complete, exalting, touched with tenderness and fire. He had married believing this his. And for a long while had gone on hoping: making excuses for Claire. She was young—sweet—delicate, filling him with undreamed of gentleness. One day she would awaken.

And suddenly with shame and a feeling of outrage the knowledge that his fervor was an offense to her. She had no unplumbed depths—no flaming heights. A pauper. She could dispense with all manifestations of love and be happier.

So he took refuge in cynicism, masking his shocking wound. Yet all the while secretly believing in a love, rapt, ardent, enduring! all the while wondering about it! subconsciously waiting for it. It was now his!

And Roen knew that he loved her in this unreckoning completeness.

She knew it and could not deny her gladness. She now felt young. She was no longer a woman climbing upward in the

thirties—years closing in—empty years. Hope of love, home, child vanishing.

She went one Saturday to take care of Jackie's little girl. She had now none of the violent, desperate emotion that made her feel that she could absorb the child—absorb it into her very flesh. She had only a brimming love—a joyous delight—

But suddenly she found herself scanning the features of the baby—comparing them to an image in her mind—a vague, nebulous image that long ago had first come to her and then had gone away. And was now returned—the shadow image of a child.

* * * * * * *

They walked over the long, green hill, turning their glance to the ocean. Its vast, lonely quiet, then its gusty charge of waters to the beach, gave them a feeling of immensity—of utter isolation . . .

"Far out there, Roen—dim—do you see the Farallones? It would not be so ill living there—"

She knew what he meant and let her eyes wander over the waves—glad that he suddenly put his arm about her . . .

"It is going to rain," said she, and put out her hand . . .

Almost as she spoke—the rain fell—in thin, silvery hairs.

He paused suddenly and turned her to him, looking at the rain drops sparkling on her hair and on her lips. He said, his voice breaking: "Roen—I so love you—"

She felt his eyes reaching into her heart, drawing it unalterably—

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They stood in the dim hall. He closed his arms about her. He said all those things that passionate, stormy hearts have

always said, "Roen—take me—Roen, love me, Roen, only you and I—this only—"

And she, seeing his lowered head, the soft black hair—seeing his lips pale and shaken. She listening as to sweeping, heart-breaking music. And moving to him in a warm, intoxicating compulsion—a divine, inevitable compulsion, putting her arms about him—

CHAPTER XX

Thus—across the infinite sense of loss there came now fulfillment. It came in this sad, terrible way. Yet, for all this with a wounding beauty.

She could not bear to be away from him. She needed his voice in her ears; needed his nearness and the feeling that then obliterated thought—the feeling of her whole being moving toward him in a divine, heartbreaking compulsion.

She stood in her garden. Twilight laid a filament of silver on the leaves: the buds were closed, drooping a little in the misty chill.

Roen touched the buds—touched them softly. The twilight, the drooping roses, the garden all hung with silver mist affected her achingly. She had a longing to withdraw into the misty twilight; be lost in this loveliness that was chill and quiet, yet hurt her penetrantly.

All her life she had prayed for love. As a little girl she had come running out here to gather that handful of purple pansies that Dearie might look thrilling as an angel for Bobby-dad. She had watched those two and asked that love like theirs be given her.

Love that laid her heart bare to all this wounding beauty, that set her moving about the garden, touching the buds, pressing her face against the honeysuckle vines: love that made her close her eyes sharply against the little stars now strewing the

sky—was hers. And everything—the Sabbath night, the drooping flowers, the silver mist, he and his eyes and his voice, smote her spirit.

She needed him here—standing at her side. Needed his hand touching hers. That the night and its beauty and her thought would be shut out by the music of his voice drowning her ears.

He came. His eyes, worshiping, humble, uncertain, went immediately seeking hers: seeking in the dark of the starlit garden. His lips moved pleadingly. Yet he didn't speak. He, too, needed. He was like a boy needing her. She flung her head back, blinking, swallowing tears. She said softly: "Mark—" and stole into his arms.

Now, when she walked through the park, inhaling the pungence of eucalyptus trees and would sometimes chance to see a white cloud rimmed with purple fire, fog drifting through the branches or even the new, tender leaves curling, she felt an immense lump oppressing her throat.

She never remembered a spring so piercing in its loveliness. She was hardly able to bear it.

* * * * * * *

She felt grateful to him because his eyes whether they looked at her gaily or with a wistful yearning returned to her the love of her youth—included this love in the great love she felt for him—

The love that all her life she had awaited was now hers. She accepted it with this pathetic, trembling gratitude. And did not murmur that it came unfairly—covertly—unhappily.

She tried not to think of this. But sometimes when she would be waiting for Mark—when she would be walking rest-

lessly about the living room she had to fight against a dread—a chill, forbidding dread of a time when he might no longer be hers.

And when she went to Jackie's home, when she played with the little girl she often found herself on the verge of hot tears.

Once when they were having dinner, Jackie spoke to her three times. She heard, but vaguely. She did not answer. For she was lost in a dream. Mark's image was in her mind and the echo of a thing he said with such kindling tenderness, "Oh, Roen—I so love you!"

"For the third time, Ron, did you play golf to-day? Why the lapse? You must be in love!"

Her eyes cowered—stricken—the color left her face.

And sometimes sitting before the fire she grew quiet with a smile that was too steadfast on her lips. She was seeing, in a momentary flash, that low chair where Mark sat, empty.

"What is troubling you, Roen, dear?"

"Nothing! Nothing!" For she would not bicker with Destiny. She would be glad for the little she might have—live in this glowing NOW.

Often she felt prayerful about it. As though she might give thanks and a God would understand. He would know that she needed so piteously this love of Mark's. She needed this from Life. And so it was given to her.

Even for a little while. She would not say a word if it were retaken. She would go down the years and it would glow like a holy torch in her heart, always. There would be no emptiness—because of this immortal glow that no sorrow and no destitution would ever extinguish.

She leaned over and ran her hand gaily, tenderly, through his soft, black hair.

"Nothing troubles me, Mark. Only sometimes I wonder if you've said all the things I keep hearing. Or if I've imagined them. I'm so glad you've said them, Mark."

"Truly, Roen? Sometimes I wonder about this."

"No—never wonder. Only speak again—" She took his face in her hands and laughed softly and kissed him.

His heart swelled. He found her wondrous in her vital sweetness—incredibly dear. More and more so.

She was more beautiful—infinitely—than his dream. She was HIS.

Nothing would now alter this. And this fact wiped out the Past, that only in an external way belonged to him. All that was real—all that was living in his heart and spirit was Roen's.

He sat in his deserted home steeped in the dream of her—in the flame of her—in the wonder that this had come to pass.

His one thought was to make their union enduring.

The image of Claire passed across his rhapsodies. He viewed it quietly—coldly—distantly.

She would not suffer. Only her pride would suffer. He would provide well for her.

In these plannings, there came sometimes a disquieting sense of alarm. Claire was rigid in her ideas. She had a strong conventional bias which she interpreted as her deeply spiritual nature.

She might object—she might fight him.

But he mastered this fear. No—she was too proud to fight. She would release him with hurt, quiet reproach.

Yet he wondered how he might broach the subject. If Claire decided that he was doing wrong—if she felt it was her duty as his wife to save him—to hold him fast to his marriage—if she took this attitude, then she would come flying home without a moment's delay . . .

He resented hotly the necessity of asking permission from a third party—an outsider. Such he now regarded her. . . . She had been an outsider nearly thirteen years.

And when his thoughts reached this confused, irrational state he would decide to go away with Roen to remain with her whether he could get release or not—

Late in April her letters brought him a flare of hope. She was in love with Europe. She spoke again and again of the charm of Parisian life—the fascination of its culture.

She wrote "One could live well here, Mark, for $75 a month—that is, if they were content to live richly but without ostentation. Yesterday we met a young professor who formerly taught in Harvard. He is here with his wife and two children. Their living expenses, even including the laundry and the maid, are less than $3 a day—for the entire family.

"Mark—how thrilling it would be if we should take up our abode here . . ."

And later she asked if he would mind if she remained six weeks longer. The Martins were planning a trip to Norway not included in her original schedule.

He wrote back immediately telling her by all means to take the trip.

He said: "Claire, would you really like to stay on in Paris indefinitely? Tell me, are the charms sufficient to compensate

for my absence? Don't evade, Claire. I shan't be hurt . . . For I know the truth . . . Wouldn't you be willing to stay indefinitely without me?"

He would be able to tell from her answer her exact feeling. Even if she evaded. He waited her letter with a seething, almost wild impatience.

CHAPTER XXI

One morning—a Saturday—as Roen was finishing breakfast, a special delivery letter came. So she poured another cup of coffee and sat down to read it in eager slowness. The previous evening Mark had been kept at the office. Often, when this happened, he wrote to her. She loved these letters. The phrases recurred in her thought, sweet and warm, like the perfume of a flower or the notes of a song.

This one today had an arresting message:

"It is now 12:30. Half an hour ago I passed your cottage. I drove slowly, longing to stop for a moment. I wanted to ask a question.

"Last night you said a thing that came with bitter shock. You said: 'Don't make me think; let me have my precious interlude unstained by thought—'

"Roen, do you realize all you packed into that sentence? INTERLUDE! You mean then that we are to part? We cannot. We have not spoken of the future, but it is in my thoughts always; and though you fight it, it must be in yours. Roen, beloved, there is no future for either of us without the other. My future is yours, and yours is mine.

"It is for me to make this a fact. Be certain that I shall.

"I have one regret—the regret that I was not prophetic; that I did not wait through years for you. But it was you always that I've loved; you always that I've sought. You

and the miracle of love like yours. I have found you. You are mine and shall be so always. Nothing can alter this. All other claims are paltry compared to the supreme claim of your heart on mine and mine on yours. This is real. This would exist though worlds and laws were wiped away.

"On my house and my goods another has claim. But on myself—none. All that is living; all that laughs and has youth and joy within me belongs to you. The wonder that is you, Roen, rekindled me to life. To the wonder that is You, this recreated I belongs. I would live and laugh, dear Roen. I find it sweet to live and laugh. With YOU."

While she worked, Roen kept seeing Mark sitting in the low chair near the fire; reaching up and with flushed, adoring eyes, clasping her arms. She grew warm—almost oppressed with this seeking, happy image of him. When he so sought her, she wished that they could be lost—vanish eternally in one of these poignant moments. She could not deny him. She would never have strength to deny him—

He wanted to live and laugh. With her— Again and again during the lazy Saturday morning the phrase re-echoed.

Towards noon Morse began dictating. He suddenly discovered half a dozen letters he wanted answered before the week passed.

They were working feverishly when the door of the next office banged. Came a sharp cry, immediately throttled—a frightened, gasping cry.

Ugly sounds followed this; the sound of a chair thrust aside; swift, terrified steps; a woman's furiously excited voice: "No, you don't! Take that! And that! You—! That, that and that!"

An appalling silence. Suddenly a low, agonized voice, "Stop!" Roen recognized the voice of Florie Fisher, stenographer in the next office. A hoarse, frenzied: "Stop— Oh— God!"

The steps again, as though someone lurched blindly along the wall and was pursued by that insensate: "No, you don't! Take that! That and that and that!" Ferocious—exultant—sickening. Florie running. The other pursuing.

Gregg Morse stole to the partition. "Ye gods!" said he, turning pale: "That's Barrows' wife. She's beating Florie."

Quiet. Broken with a gloating: "How do you like that! And that!"

No protest.

And the other: "Cry! Scream! I'll make you!"

Morse sprang to the door. "She'll kill her!"

Roen followed—leaden—her face gray.

They were confronted by a distraught figure standing on the threshold of the adjoining room—a woman brandishing a horsewhip, saying in a harsh shrillness:

"That'll teach you to break up homes! That'll teach you who owns Ned Barrows! You—!"

She strode down the hall, folding the whip with a menacing "that'll teach her."

* * * * * * *

They found Florie hiding in the small hat closet, cowering in the corner. She wouldn't take her hands from her face. Her hands were swollen. Her bare arms showed cruel welts.

She said brokenly, "Leave me alone—please leave me alone," and refused the drink Morse excitedly poured from a flask.

To his well-meaning, "Here, here, Florie, take it . . . shall we call a cab?" she shook her head bitterly.

"Oh, leave me alone. Ron, keep the girls out of here. Please, leave me alone!"

Roen lowered her head over her note book, pencil poised. She felt shivering to the bone—shivering and sick.

Everyone on this floor of the building knew about Florie Fisher and Ned Barrows. The affair had gone on six months.

Florie commanded attention—a distinctive type, seen always in simple olive-drab suit and white Peter Pan collars. A girl about 25, with clear Spanish skin, remarkable emerald-green eyes and dusky black hair. She had a lithe, boyish figure accentuated by her unvarying uniform. A girl with an air, a breeze, an irritating consciousness of her own charm, that enhanced it with men and made girls envious.

She had stocky, florid, inarticulate Ned Barrows completely under her thumb. Barrows, who was married to a hot-tempered virago and who had three half-grown children, succumbed at a glance to Florie's lure.

Months ago rumors flew about. Everyone began secretly to await some sordid scandal.

But this was brutal—this was revolting—utterly.

"Where were we?" said Morse. Then gruffly: "Oh, the devil—listen to that stampede. Dirty mess—I told Barrows to watch his step. With a wife like Emily Barrows on his trail—"

He listened—he went to the door and opened it cautiously, coming back with a smirk . . .

"She had sense enough to lock the door. Too bad she didn't do that an hour ago—"

Roen got up and took a drink of water and was shocked by the leaden image of her own face. She, too, had been beaten.

She felt like blows on her flesh that shrill: "This'll teach you to break up homes! This'll teach you who owns Ned Barrows!"

She felt resentful to Florie Fisher. She was dragged down by Florie Fisher.

"It's not as though she loved him," she said in a hollow, faint tone. "She wants what she can get from him. She wouldn't look at Ned Barrows except for his money."

"What difference does that make?"

"If she cared for him and the affair was inevitable because of a great love, then it could only be regrettable, sorrowful. Florie has not this excuse. So it is repellent!"

Morse shrugged. "Angry wives don't inquire for motives. It may justify a woman to herself that she loves a man. It doesn't justify her to the man's wife nor to the world. She rates a whipping just the same whether her motive is love or avarice."

Roen drew her pencil down the page. It made a long, shaky line.

"Do you think," pursued Morse idly, irked by the whole occurrence—his zest for work gone—"that a wife should resign her husband to another when the other loves him and has won his love?"

"I don't know," said she, with a withering dryness in her heart, "but the other woman's state is pitiful—it is surely pitiful. Possession of another without love, though ten times married, is immoral, is sordid—"

"Oh—let the letters go," said he abruptly.

She went over to the mirror and reached for her hat with a clammy, shivering oppression.

CHAPTER XXII

Roen, putting on her hat, carefully and slowly tucked in a flying strand of hair. She was moist with reluctance—unwilling to enter the hall. As though it were she who had been whipped.

Girls from other offices were covertly sauntering back and forth, waiting for Florie Fisher to come out. Others were jammed in the dressing room, giving excited, dramatic versions of the beating.

Half a dozen had seen Emily Barrows as she strode to the elevator, muttering, folding the horsewhip. They said her face was purple. They said she was going to kill Florie if she ever entered Ned Barrows' office again—if she ever looked at him. They kept opening and closing the door to see if Florie might be coming out.

Then they saw Gregg Morse leaving. And a moment later came swooping upon Roen.

"You saw Florie! Was she much hurt? Come on, Ron, don't be a piker. How did she look? What did she say?"

"She asked us to leave her alone. She's not going to come out of that office till every soul is gone. She doesn't want anyone to see her. Who would! So it's no use to wait. She kept her back turned to us and all she asked was to be let alone."

Opinion divided sharply at this—some pitying, others caustic.

Too bad Florie didn't get exclusive sooner. Flaunting her conquests in everyone's face!

"Poor kid, bet she feels cheap. Hate to be in her boots. Hate to take a horsewhipping for the likes of Ned Barrows!"

"Hum—Barrows may not be worth a whipping, but the sable coat he gave Florie sure is!"

"If she wasn't such a fool she might have had the coat and escaped the lashing. She didn't show any finesse playing a married man right out in the open. Why didn't she use her imagination and see where she was heading?"

"A girl who goes out after another woman's husband has no imagination or she couldn't go on with it," said forthright Alice Rich. "If she had imagination she could see the wife's side of things. But all Florie Fisher can see is herself—"

Roen stood on the fringe of all this hot-cheeked excitement —mute, stormy, sickened.

She, Roen Ross, proud, strong, unassailable, had taken another woman's husband.

It did not matter that the man was Mark, who loved her, and whom she loved.

It did not matter, though they were drawn together by the finest and tenderest emotion—the motive was nothing; the fact all—a wife was wronged.

And they two, though their love was a thing to astonish angels with its beauty, were shameful—destitute of honor.

Their love, as Gregg Morse said, might justify them to themselves. It would not justify them to the man's wife nor to the world.

And Mark's challenge—"all claims are paltry beside the supreme claim of your heart on mine and mine on yours,"

though it thrilled her; though it voiced an elemental human law, was but a pathetic and futile defi.

They remained outlaws—she and Mark.

She had never so baldly faced this.

She had regarded Mark's love as a stolen gift from life. Given by some Great Kindness to save her from encompassing despondence.

She accepted it gratefully, prayerfully, yet with the secret intuition that this was but an interlude. In this way she had been able to shut out the thought of Mark's wife. When Claire returned, Roen would eliminate herself.

Now, though shaken and unnerved, she reviewed herself with the cold eyes of a stranger. Mark had a wife, who was unsuspecting; whom he had encouraged in this trip abroad. In her absence and in her innocence she was betrayed.

Roen fancied her returning—suddenly discovering her home despoiled. She saw Claire as she visioned her—sensitive, righteous—little appealing thing, moving away in shocked, incredible hurt. Grieving—yet because of her pride, relinquishing Mark.

Roen, who all her life had been the one effaced; who since she was a little girl just 13 had sacrificed her own fulfillment, now found it unbearable, even in imagination to blot out another.

She walked about the living room, touching things—the old drapes—Bobby-dad's picture—the dusty books. She thought mutely: "I'll go away—"

No sooner did this idea take shape than Mark came before her. Go away and leave him?—send him back to Claire; to that pallid home where all that was joyous and living and

vital about him had no being? Send him back to a destitution of heart and spirit more chill than death?

Send Mark, who was hers by every instinctive right, back to this? And why?

To save Claire?

Sacrifice Mark, whom she worshiped, for Claire? Deny him—crush him?

She felt his eyes touch pleadingly on hers. Her steps lagged. She could not hurt Mark. She would never hurt him!

Now the prospect of returning him to another who had only robbed him—only thwarted him, grew monstrous and impossible. Nothing could give Mark back to Claire. She had never truly possessed him.

And now the prospect of ending their love seemed to her weak—paltry and weak—a thing that one who cares for himself—who would save himself might do. Not a thing she, Roen Ross, would consider.

She thought distractedly: "I'll pay! I'll suffer! Anything!"

All at once she grew quiet—she said aloud and quietly: "I deserved better than this."

Better than to be put in a class with Florie Fisher!

She stood before the bookcase—absently—vaguely turning leaves of the books. Down there on the last shelf was the tattered leather volume of Burns. Bobby-dad used to read her those poems. Those and the old English ballads. Later, she read them all to Jackie, loving their haunting pathos even when she didn't understand the words. "Edward" and "Waly Waly" and "Helen of Kirconnel."

On the second shelf was the Yeats that Michael loved. For

the first time in years she took it and turned to the poems he used to quote. She felt him looking at her. From his eyes both he and Mark looked out.

Suddenly she recalled a phrase from Michael's last letter. "I would send one to comfort you, dear, dear Asthore!"

She covered her face. She was bereft of thought.

CHAPTER XXIII

"Roen," said Mark with an intuition that often startled her, "you are regretting tonight."

She answered sadly, glancing to the water that was now a lake of gold: "I cannot regret."

Could she lament Mark's love and her acceptance of it? She recalled her distraction during this ghastly Saturday afternoon; her decision: "I'll go away." And saw herself walking back to the empty aloneness—to that bleak quiet.

She glanced quickly to Mark and said sharply, with a touch of fear: "No! I don't regret—"

And thought—pathetically, "for the present I can postpone. We do not need to think—yet!"

As long as they could sit here on the rim of this vanishing world—just they and the sunset sea, there was beauty—there was peace.

They could look in each other's eyes and feel proud—feel unashamed. They could say to each other with trembling happy lips: "Only you and I! We two—the world shut out!"

She turned her face from him and said softly: "I want you to remember this, Mark. No matter what happens, I shall always be glad—always grateful."

She smiled tenderly into those wistful eyes. But he said anxiously: "What do you mean when you say 'no matter what happens'? That we are to part, Roen?"

"We cannot predict. Yes—we may part."

"We shall never part."

"Let us not think of it. Let us not talk of it."

"You read my letter, Roen. You have been thinking of the future. As I have. My future is yours."

"I do not want to think of it, Mark. Or how it would be accomplished."

The image of Claire was in both their minds.

He asked simply: "Can we avoid it, Roen?"

She did not answer.

"Then you meant it when you spoke of an interlude. And you mean to send me back?"

There rose in him a resentment that now swelled and burned. He would not return to Claire.

"I know what you are thinking, Roen. I have faced it all. Do not imagine that others feel as you feel. The 'I' that you love, Roen, belongs to you alone. No one else cares for it or wants it. It could not exist without you. This is the truth."

She felt her love like a weight on her heart. She sank low in the car, leaning heavily against him.

When they drove home, he stopped the car in Fell street on the south side against the trees of the Panhandle several blocks from Roen's cottage.

She was stepping out before she noticed this.

"Oh, why, Mark?" she asked, shaken and hurrying into the park with her head down. "Why did you stop here?"

"I usually do."

She felt her neck hot and stained. Her breath oppressed her.

And now they came silently into the hall. He closed the door and stood against it.

"I'm sorry—sorry that I bring you love like this, Roen. Sorry that I bring it in pain."

She was unnerved and pinched the tips of her fingers and did not look at him.

Suddenly she said: "The world shames us! It is the world that shames us!"

She went up and put her hands on his shoulder: "I thought this afternoon that I should go away, Mark."

"Something like that, I knew—Roen. Why—would you be happier?"

She looked in his eyes and saw there the eyes of Michael—the eyes of her father—all the tenderness, the sweetness—the love of her life. She moved near so that she felt drowned in his eyes. She said with a sob: "I cannot go away." And knew that whatever the price—though the price be death—she would pay it.

And felt as before that this was fated—this was foreordained.

* * * * * * *

Late that night Mark read the letter from Claire. He sat with it crumpled in his hands. Then he smoothed it out and read paragraphs again.

What, after all, if she would not release him—? If she would never release him. If she should insist on her right to doom him to this life sentence?

Of worse, if she should return and try to be the kind of wife she imagined he might want.

The letter he looked forward to with such seething impatience

shocked him. It showed an aspect of Claire that he did not know.

"Why did you ask if I wished to stay indefinitely in Paris, Mark? You were not teasing. I know this. Would you then be willing to part with me? To have me stay here alone?

"Then I have really failed you, Mark? And you would be even anxious to not see me again? I am thinking of many half facetious remarks—those cynical flings of yours that used so to trouble me, Mark, dear, you were not trying to hurt me then—but to tell me I was failing. Strange that absence from you should make me see all things so differently. Or is it the traveling—is it the meeting of new people—of gaining new viewpoints?

"I do not know. I only know that now I seem to see you so clearly. Dear Mark, you would not really want me gone from your life?

"I wonder what it would be without you? Since I was 15—do you remember at the dance when you said I was an angel? You were only 17 yourself. Do you remember that we took hands and ran out to the garden? And you kissed me. And neither of us had ever kissed anyone before!

"Mark—the trip to Norway may be called off. I hope so—I want to come home. . . . I want to be with you. I long for the moment when the train pulls in to the Oakland mole. I want your arms around me. Oh dear—I hope—dear Mark—I have not lost you—"

* * * * * * *

Claire was his wife. She had a voice in the disposal of her future. And in the disposal of his. She could quietly refuse separation.

And if she should now return and innocently try to win his love; win him back to her girlhood ideal of him? Put her hands, little, soft, inert in his, stand on her toes and shyly wait for him to kiss her?

The prospect was intolerable. She must not come back.

At all costs he must prevent Claire's return. He felt smothered at the mere thought of the confused, tragic scenes that would inevitably follow her homecoming.

He decided to write to her. This would be hard. He could see her neat, shapely brown head lowered; the quivering of her small, sensitive chin when she read the word that he did not want her back. She must remain in Paris alone.

She would suffer, at first—naturally. He did not wish to think of her weeping.

He sat down heavily and wondered how he might tell her—how he might soften this.

He would provide well for her—extravagantly.

He would have to write very guardedly, yet make her see that his decision was unalterable.

If she refused to accept it—if she would not release him—then he would go away. He would take Roen with him. He did not question that Roen would come.

Sunday he wrote that letter. After a page of musing he broke into it.

"I was not jesting when I suggested that you remain in Paris as long as you like. You do not know, Claire, how very revealing are your letters. You are happier now than you have been in years. Why deny it?

"I have known for a long, long time that I have not made you happy. You have tried bravely to reform me to your

ideals, but, for all this, marriage with me has been increasingly onerous, and disappointing to you.

"Be honest, Claire, and admit this. How many times have you rushed from me to your dressing room—too proud to let me see your tears?

"And how seldom have I really delighted you? This is not because I have not tried. It is because you do not admire me, my thoughts, my emotions or my attitudes. You want me different. The real I is to you a crude, offensive thing. You know I am writing the truth.

"In late years I have rarely expressed an opinion because I have realized you would not like it. You would think I was cruelly trying to shock and hurt you. I have kept myself from you because myself is repellent to you.

"So many times you have told me so. You remember that night of Laura's tin wedding? You actually felt that I wanted to be annoying to you. The fact is I was thoughtlessly being Myself.

"This self you have never really accepted. You have incessantly compared the Man I have become with the Boy I was. You did not want me to change.

"In your absence you have gone back nineteen years and in the glow of these memories you are eager to come home. You are loving the Mark of 17—the only Mark you ever loved. This is the Mark you long to meet at the train.

"It would indeed be wonderful if we could have made enduring that magnificent young emotion. Perhaps it was the fault of neither but of Life that it passed.

"The fact remains, Claire, that we are not 15 and 17 today.

I am thinking of these later years. Have we meant much to each other?

"Are you not really a little relieved to be free of me? Claire—think of this carefully.

"Because I was not jesting when I suggested that you remain in Paris. I was admitting to myself that you would be far better without me. I was glancing back over the past eight or nine years and in your absence finding them hard to bear.

"They seem false to me. They seem wrong. I do not want to go back to the strain of them. I feel that I cannot go back to them.

"And that is why I want you to stay longer in Paris—indefinitely—not evading the issue, Claire, but facing it. As you know, I have sufficient resources. I want you to be happy—to have everything you care for. If you like, you might write to your mother and ask her to join you—"

He paused. He could almost feel the tears on Claire's cheeks . . . see her raise appealing, bewildered eyes. Send for her mother? Tell her mother Mark did not want her back.

He tried to soften it—writing and rewriting. But then he only made it too vague. He had to let it go. He determined to follow this letter with another more ultimate . . . let her know as kindly as he could—but absolutely—that their life together was ended.

He went out and put this letter in the mail—the letter that would release him to Roen—remake his life.

The letter that Claire was never to receive.

CHAPTER XXIV

After he mailed that letter, Mark had some rather terrible days.

The thirteen years of his association with Claire now tormented him with the many images they had stored. He could visualize her too well. He could see the helpless quivering of her childlike mouth, then see her becoming pale, quiet, hiding her feelings, going about with assumed serenity that the Martins might not discover her wound.

"Lord," he thought, champing his teeth, "what a relief when it's settled, when she accepts it."

He counted the time till she should have the letter. There might be some delay because of the trip to Norway. It was now the end of June. She should have it any time now.

He fancied her tearing the envelope daintily—flushing because the letter appeared long. Then, reaching the vital paragraphs, shutting her eyes over them—unable to proceed. And going to her room—standing utterly quiet—reading on—blinded with those ready, silent tears.

For days she would be mute with bewilderment. So it might be the end of July before he would be relieved of this brutal suspense.

It was possible that she might not deign an answer . . .

Yet he went carefully over his business affairs. He made a clean division of his property, prepared to sign half to Claire.

He hoped she would not return to the city. This would increase the pain. Especially for her.

She was proud and would not like explaining to her friends. Much easier for Claire to allow a year to pass. And then return: then say to the likes of Laura Thompson: "You know Mark and I had such different viewpoints. He never appreciated the things I admired. He had no reverence for my ideals. He thought they were just to be scoffed at—"

And Laura and all of this set that could not assimilate Mark, would greedily answer: "He wasn't fine enough for you, Claire. We all saw it. George and I often remarked on the vulgarity of his ideas. You remember the shocking way he talked at my anniversary? As though he believed in immorality. I often thought how difficult it must be for you—with your refinement!"

Claire, who had no robust self-esteem, would be supported by this attitude.

For her own sake, Mark hoped she would remain in Paris—as much as he demanded it for his own.

He followed his first letter with others advising her—

The waiting told on him. He imagined the uncertainty of her position was also telling on Roen.

One night when he thought she looked pale: when her beautiful, passionate eyes were rimmed with shadows, he said abruptly: "Roen—when at last we can acknowledge each other!"

She seemed to him very tall—majestic. She looked in his eyes steadfastly, not smiling.

"What made you say that, Mark?"

"I am always thinking it. I so long for it. Sometimes I

half wish I had waited—wish that I had not implored you so terribly."

She said, almost inaudibly: "It might never have been. Mark, is it on your own account you wish this?"

"No—"

"Do not wish it on mine."

Thus she spoke to him with quiet, unsmiling majesty. And so it was always when she looked in his dear face and felt lost and helpless in her emotions.

When she was alone, this quiet deserted her. Lately especially—these heavy fog-laden days in early July.

In the beginning she had not thought.

He had come in the zero hour when all her valiant courage was gone, when she saw the empty years closing her definitely, hope of love gone, dream of a child gone.

Then he had come with this engulfing sweetness. Then he had knelt and clasped his arms about her, returning the lost dreams with his tender adoration, with his: "Roen, you need things to love? Take me— Oh, take me, Roen, to fill your heart—" And had seemed a boy with his need for her.

She clung to him with the desperation of one clinging to life—clinging to sanity.

Now—often—more and more often she was THINKING. She would sometimes grow still and cold with horror of herself. She would ask in wonder: "What have I done? What am I doing?"

And it was difficult to identify the Roen Ross who for so many years had been so proud, so strong, so unassailable with this Roen who had things to conceal.

When she visited Jackie and Virginia she found it hard to

keep her attention. Jackie was so proud now—a full-fledged doctor—so young and so proud.

Once he said to her as he drove her home: "Jinny and I are going to Europe. We can live on $200 a month there as well as here. And I'll have two years' experience in a German clinic. You're coming with us. Roen, you've got to! I won't leave you here alone.

"I'd like a chance to make a few returns, Ron. Don't think you're the only one that can appreciate. I'm selfish, too—I'd like a chance to give you something. Ron—honestly, Jinny and I'll feel rotten if you don't come with us."

Roen thought with a shivering pang: "Suppose you knew? Oh, Jackie, suppose you knew—"

Yet in her colder moments she knew Jackie would never blame her. He would regret. He would become profane with anger because at the last, she had found love only in this cruel, grudging way. He would want to strike out with violence because Life had driven her to bitter extremes—always.

But he would understand—he would champion her.

And in these colder moments, her own thought championed her. She loved Mark—with a wild abandon—with the love thwarted through years. She had a right to this love. She would not stain it with weakness and remorse.

But these colder moments were lately deserting her. Coming home in the evening she walked listlessly up the cottage steps . . . sometimes coming to abrupt halts—sometimes saying to herself: "I wonder—Dear God, I wonder—"

One day in the middle of July, Gregg Morse said to her: "When are you taking your vacation, Roen?"

"Soon—in a month, perhaps." And suddenly: "My brother

wants me to go to Europe with him in the end of August. Would you give me a leave of absence . . .?"

"For how long?"

"A year—"

"How can I do without you? I'll have to, of course. A trip to Europe isn't a thing to be turned down every day. Are you telling me definitely that you want to leave?"

She answered quickly and feeling her lips draw in a tight, almost immovable line: "Yes—I want the leave—from next month if you can—"

She was not thinking of the trip to Europe. As she rode home, she thought: "Why did I do that? Why—"

But she knew.

And that night sitting by the fire, she got up and traced the shadows on the wall—traced them with a warm flood of memory rushing over her.

She said to those shadow-forms that were like eerie children running—she said huskily, starkly: "I've always wanted this —always wanted it. Oh, God—this is what I've always wanted!"

And sank on her knees and began to pray.

CHAPTER XXV

The first Sunday in August, Roen worked in her garden, turning the rich, warm earth, absently stroking the fresh, silky green leaves of the dahlias. A sweet, warm, hazy day. Now she went about, pruning the bushes. And now snipping an apron of white roses.

These brought back to her in a sudden, melting recollection the basket of flowers Michael brought that long-distant day Dearie came from the hospital. That Saturday when they knew the marriage was again and more indefinitely postponed. Yet Michael came bringing golden chrysanthemums. Came with such dear understanding and said: "Don't be afraid to look at me, Asthore. I won't ask more than you can give."

She thought of this now and pressed her face against the roses.

She felt suddenly exhausted and sat down in the big hammock chair, closing her eyes, letting the mellow sun pour over her like a bath. She sat here dreaming—half dozing . . . all her life flowing together confusedly.

A screen door banged somewhere. Into the drift of Roen's thoughts came sharply an image of fat Maggie banging the door just like that—standing on the porch, stooping down, her corsets creaking—whispering: "You have a little brother!" Whispering this that had gone tinkling like Christmas bells in the child Roen's mind.

How beautiful that experience had been. How it filled the house with tenderness—Bobby-dad kneeling at Dearie's couch, his arms clasped about her waist, his face hidden on her shoulder. He loved her so. And now he feared he might lose her. Oh, it was a melting thing to love like that. Even a child thirteen knew it and took the dream and waited.

Till one came who said: "Do you know why beauty makes you weep? Because it gives you a vision of fine, holy things you want with all your heart. It draws on you and calls to you—the way you call to me, Asthore. . . ."

Images coming suddenly and fading. Michael vanishing. Now Mark, who brought back Michael's eyes, leaning down and whispering: "I will make it up to you—bring back the singing music. It is not too late—"

Images trailing—Roen's eyes moist under their shut lids. Images all merging together. Music floating down the river—trees lost and drowned in the water. "I love you so!" Hills vanishing into a sunset sky—earth, sky—past and present all mingled together. "I love you so!"

Now the sun wrapped her in delicious languor; now so faintly came the song of the gaudy little humming birds. They were busy in the heliotrope. They were darting away—the dreamy haze was becoming quiet—more pervasive and quiet.

Suddenly, her heart bounding, Roen leaped to her feet. She looked about, incredulous, listening, all her pulses racing. She felt within her—astonishing, undreamed of, bewildering, the flutter of life. Delicate as her flowers opening their petals; tremendous as a planet swinging through spheres, arousing yet shy, the flutter of life.

She sank down—trembling—flushing. Wild tears were in her eyes—tears of a wild gladness.

She clasped her hands over her face and sat there in the sun and haze and the song of the humming birds. Her hands grew wet. Yet she was glad—filled with mysterious, sobbing gladness. She could not help this. She had heard a music—it was there playing on the chords of her body—frail, wondrous—a song blown down the breeze. No thought could shut away its sweetness. . . .

Uncertainty ended, Roen's child coming to her at last. Years she had dreamed of it. It had haunted her heart with tender longing . . . a shadow presence whispering to her in the night. At first, dimly, shyly—her child and Michael's.

Then terribly—gnawingly, mad with regrets she mourned it.

Now coming to her. Her child's and Mark's.

She thought breathless—"What should I do? I think I'll go away—" And had a vision of herself rushing into obscurity—she and her child running away from the sight of men and women.

She put her hand over her heart and again was lost in a half-savage dream. All these years she wanted this—clamored for it. So it had come to her—her child had heard her calling and it answered.

She felt as though it were a personality—a beautiful, brave, understanding personality—a dear, holy presence—HERS! She wondered with a thrilled awe about it. She spoke to it—weeping.

Then she began to walk about the house—from room to room. She would go away—soon. She would tell no one—not even Mark.

She stopped abruptly as she thought this—she saw his wistful, worshiping eyes. No—she could not do this—

She would tell him first.

Now—all the miserable, shaming facts she had so insistently ignored washed over her. She would tell Mark—he would get freed and come with her.

And that other—Mark's wife, who was proud and sensitive and had loved him fourteen years, would be quietly—coldly dismissed. Her pain would be ignored.

She was but one against three. Roen leaned against the door. She felt almost fainting.

As she stood so fighting this ferocious battle, the bell rang—Oh, Sunday!—Jackie and Virginia coming to take her riding—insisting that she accompany them. . . .

She wiped the moisture from her lips and from her forehead. . . . She daubed rouge on her cheeks and, putting on her hat, opened the door. . . . "Just a moment," she called back—"I'll be ready"—

The world intruding on her already. She would have to reckon with the world—meet it.

As she drove with them she thought starkly: "I'll tell them. I wanted this—always—now it's mine. I'll say so—"

But when Jackie was leaving he asked her again: "Ron—won't you decide? We're going the end of this month. You'll surely come?"

"Listen, Jackie, I asked Gregg Morse to give me leave. He asked me to wait until the first of the year. He increased my salary to $175. I should wait. . . . Besides—Jackie, I want to have money enough to pay for myself. Listen—I want to live my own life. I'll come in the spring. There's a darling."

"Ron—you seem awfully excited—"

She smiled and wondered if she could keep from fainting—if she could hold her swooning senses. . . .

"I hate to make you unhappy— But I'd so rather come entirely on my own, Jackie. That's about all I can have—the fun of meeting my own life entirely. . . ."

"Oh, well, Ron—" said he, touched, his eyes snapping—"Is that such fun, Ron—?"

"A satisfaction," she answered softly—

And closing the door, leaned weakly against it. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

SAYING to Jackie: "A satisfaction to meet my own life entirely—"; closing the door on Jackie like this, seemed to Roen symbolic. From now on she would shut out the world; from now on the world would shut its door on her. Why must this be?

She regarded the prospect distractedly. How could it be wrong that she, Roen Ross, would have a child? Why was she not allowed to face it simply—admit her desperate, pathetic joy? Why does the world not accept life with a noble simplicity? Why does it not rejoice that Roen Ross is at last to have her child? This is surely wondrous. For this she was born. Why, then, is she not allowed to look up proudly and smile?

Once—when they had waited four or five years and wanted love so yearningly and saw so little hope of taking it, Michael said: "Oh, Roen, if we were but two Indians with only the need to live and laugh and eat and love—if life were primitive and sweet—and not prison house."

Once he said this. And now Roen was imagining such an existence—seeing a great, green meadow splashed with flowers. Women were sitting here in the sun—happy women twining garlands. Children ran about everywhere. They also laughed in this open sunlit meadow. Roen came across the fields of blowing flowers and sat down with the happy women. She

joined them, saying: "I too shall have a child." They were all glad about it—

She leaned all her weight on her clenched hands. Her thought became insupportable. The world was not to be reduced to Arcadian simplicity that Roen Ross might joyously fulfill her destiny. The world is civilized. And to it—blindly —many things are more important than life and the living of life.

She might say secretly through tears of incredible pain: "I cannot help it—I still am glad." This did not alter the bitterness of her position nor make the coming of her child less than tragedy.

The coming of her child was tragedy. She drank down this poisoning fact. No matter how valiantly she tried to face it—it would remain immutably tragic.

If she went away alone, Mark would be robbed and the child fatherless. She saw herself doing this—going to some isolated city and there bearing her child—fighting magnificently for it. Yet it would be branded . . . subjected to shame. And after a while it would ask eagerly, then timidly, then crimsonly about its father.

If she waited for Mark there was the wronged Claire to shame and demean them. No one knew how wounding might be the parting between Mark and his wife. The stain of this would be dragged across the future—

And if she remained here and said to Jackie—said to everyone: "I am to have a child—I have wanted this—" the child —dear child of her love and longing—would be callously hurt —perhaps brutally and irretrievably injured by an attitude it might never understand—

She went back to her room and sat listlessly, her hands clasped between her knees. If there were but some way—if only there were some strong, sufficient way to bring this child of hers here—

She did not get far with these visions. She would say—"bring it here—" and would then see it—the downy head—curled silky fingers—would feel it in her arms and would flush with wonder; would tremble with wild incredulous gratitude.

She was to have a child—her own child—that no one could ever snatch from her.

No matter what the anguish she would take it eagerly that she might have this child. And if she could save it pain—shut from it the shame of its coming, she would go to the loneliest corner of the earth and be never seen again—oh, she would do anything!

Mark came. She could not listen to him. She kept thinking: "What would he say? Would he be glad?" And suffered wondering this.

Her white lips and flaming eyes told her emotion. He took her hands. They were burning.

"What is the matter?" he asked alarmed.

"Nothing. I've been out with Jackie. He wants me to go with them."

"Will you? Are you thinking of this, Roen?" He lowered his head so that she could not see his eyes. "Do you want to go with them, Roen?"

"It might have been better."

"For whom?"

"For everyone—oh, for everyone, Mark."

"No—it would be better for no one." He now looked up and said to her quietly, speaking for the first time directly: "It would not even be better for Claire. And no matter what you do, Roen, my affairs are definitely settled. I can not and will not go back to the life I've lived for the last decade and more."

He flushed. He hated thinking of his marriage. It brought back to him experiences that made him wince—that filled him with resentment and shame. He wondered why he had so long endured it. He would never return to it.

"Are you then thinking of going with Jackie, Roen?"

"No."

"But do you want to leave me?"

They were now staring into each other's eyes and she could feel hers becoming darker—wide, dark, flaming.

"How could you wish to leave me, Roen? Space would not separate us. We are too much bound. I am so bound to you, Roen—"

Into her still, burning eyes came an awe—a parting of her white lips. "Yes—you are bound to me, Mark."

She held him a long moment with her fixed, burning eyes. He took a slow, shocked breath. And felt his hands relax with shock. "Roen—?" he whispered hoarsely.

She closed her eyes and nodded.

His veins chilled. Then this shock passed. He clasped her arms. He held her in a still panic. He said huskily: "Roen—"

* * * * * * *

That night, sitting in his living room, Mark made his plans. There was no doubt now what he should do. Thought

came in a white-light lucidity. No matter what Claire might now decide, his path was marked out.

He would get free—at any cost now.

Roen must go away. He would settle his business affairs; break openly with Claire—join her.

He tore off his collar, tossed it on the bureau. There was a fine layer of dust on the plate glass. He rubbed his palm musingly over this. Queer that Claire made no mention of his letters. They must none of them have reached her. On her way to Norway now. . . .

He decided that he would send a cable—tell her to get his letters—

Suddenly he thought with the blood in a hot flame in his mind: "It will be a year at the earliest—" A year at the earliest before he could be freed . . . the child would be born . . . would be months old before he and Roen could marry—

He walked up and down, pushing the chairs out of his way—kicking over the rugs—months old before they could marry—

They would face this—Have to.

On Tuesday there was the long-delayed word from Claire. She was coming home. They would arrive with all possible haste. They hoped to be here within three weeks.

CHAPTER XXVII

Claire was coming home. He had letters from her now. Martin's business forced this abrupt return.

Her cable was sent after they booked passage. She was on the homeward journey now . . . leaving Liverpool. Leaving without those letters of his sent to Paris, overtaking her. They would never overtake her.

She would be home. All the bitterness he hoped to avoid; all the unnecessary hurt and recrimination must be met.

He dreaded this.

He imagined the scene when he would tell her. Perhaps the morning after her arrival.

She would be unpacking her trunk. Kneeling on the floor, she would take out a bundle of letters. She would look up with an inquiring, troubled smile: "Mark, you never answered whether you really wanted me to stay in Paris. I was so pained by that."

"I answered. You must have left before the letter was forwarded."

"Oh, you answered. Did you, then, want me to stay on? You were serious? Mark! You seem so absent. After eight months do you know that you didn't kiss me? You haven't really kissed me. What did you say in the letter?" And through a dumbfounded silence: "Did you want me to stay on there indefinitely? You really meant it!"

"I thought it would be better. You've been happier these eight months than in the past fourteen years. I could tell it in your letters. I can see it now in your looks. I wanted you to face the truth. Yes—I wanted you to remain in Paris."

She would turn quietly so that he might not see her face and the tears she could never withhold. She would say in a lost tone, "Oh—ah," and getting up quickly dart from the room.

And in the night he would find a letter on his desk. Often after a disagreement Claire would spend the whole afternoon pathetically writing things she was unable to say. She wrote fluently—letters filled with yearning regret, letters recalling him to the awed, radiant tenderness of their youth, bringing back the dearness of their early love and the vision of the young, young Claire who had been lovely as an angel to the boy of seventeen.

All of this Claire's homecoming would renew. The chance for any grace in their parting was vanished.

Even when finally she would retire—proud, inarticulate, mortally hurt—he would meet in her eyes a lifelong reproach. She would give this lasting wound to his spirit—the feeling that he had brutally treated her, he had betrayed her, taken all she had to yield. And now he left her, frail and defenseless, utterly crushed.

This would be their parting.

He might try to make it easy. She would not listen to him. She would not want the hurt lessened.

Sometimes in these loaded weeks of waiting he was tempted to rush away with Roen. Pretend he was called on a business trip. This would prepare Claire.

Then he would write that he wasn't coming back. Let her bear it as she could. The hurt would be so largely in her pride —let her take it alone and fight it out.

He could never, of course, settle it this way. He would bear as much for her as he could. Settle her in some new life—then go!

Go with Roen, whose claim on him was real—whose claim he longed to welcome; wanted now passionately to acknowledge. Roen, whose child was his child. Underneath his torment and shock was now a secret exultance. He and Roen and the child—a world in themselves—they three. No one had a right to part them. No one should part them.

* * * * * * *

Once when Roen sat with her hands clasped, her eyes mooding into the fire, he leaned down and searched her face.

"What is troubling you? I mean especially?"

"I long for Jackie to be gone. I want to get away. I begin to fear."

"You do not need to."

"He must go without knowing—without suspecting. All his peace would vanish. He would want to stay—

"Yet—Oh, Mark, sometimes I long to tell him. Why should I conceal? Why am I forced to be ashamed? I AM NOT!"

He quailed before her flushed rebellion. "You will not do this, Roen? You won't do this. Easier for you to defy. But for it? Would it be easier for it?"

"There can be no easy way for it, Mark."

"Yes," he said doggedly. "There will be!"

She was not comforted. She wanted to get away quickly. The moment Jackie was safely on the steamer; the moment

she was certain he had not gone away burdened with her sorrow, then she would leave.

She was in a frenzy to be gone before Mark's wife returned. She recoiled against the thought of this Claire whom she had once glimpsed leaving Mark's office.

Thinking only of herself, she would have rushed off—made it quite impossible for Mark to find her.

But when she thought of her child—his child, too—she grew white with the woe of this responsibility. To spare herself the pain of Claire's image had she a right to sacrifice the child? Because she found it so violently distasteful to think of the wronged Claire had she a right to make a child fatherless?

At night she dreamed. Sometimes in the dream her problem was solved—all the difficulties cleared away. For in the dream she went to Claire. She said simply: "We are just to have a child—a little child. You don't think this wrong, do you?"

Claire gave an astonished, thrilled smile and put her hand in Roen's: "Oh," said she, "we always wanted one. And now you say we are to have it? This is wonderful." And they all lived quietly and gaily together and the child was adored by all of them. She wakened from these dreams, moist and shaking.

The end of August. Roen riding on the boat with Jackie and Virginia—seeing them off. Holding Jackie's baby on her lap. Thinking, "Soon I will hold my own. They do not know this. They will never know it."

Virginia taking her aside a moment: "Ron—you look perfectly gorgeous. What a dress! Oh, if you were coming. All the fun . . . good-bye, Ron, darling—"

Then Jackie: "You'll miss us and good enough for you. But in the spring, Ron. Surely now?" Proud, tender eyes so infallibly gay misting a little as he swept off his hat and kissed her—kissed her so fervently, making her heart leap; making her say that old phrase: "You angel—you darling—Jackie lad—"

And waved good-bye. Waving good-bye to many, many things.

She smiled as she rode home on the boat. She would meet her life alone. Only her little child would suffer with her. She could not spare it. In no way at all could she spare it.

Claire was in New York. In five days she would be home.

Her telegram: "We're routed through Los Angeles. Mr. Martin is stopping over a day. I'll visit mother."

Then a letter: "Mother says she may come back with me. Mark, dear, I know you'd rather we had the first days alone. I know you'd rather mother came later. But I don't want to tell her this. Will you see that the spare rooms are ready? Hazel may decide to run up with us."

He wired: "Try and evade bringing your mother. Ask her to come and visit us in the month of October. I most especially want the first week alone. Please do this, Claire."

But she answered from Los Angeles: "Mother has made all her plans. I cannot hurt her, Mark. We are driving up. Hazel is coming, too. They will only stay four days. Mark, dear, don't be grumbly about it, please. We'll be in Tuesday night."

Two days more.

Tuesday he did no work. He sat at his desk. Then he

snatched his hat and went out and walked. He went through this again and again.

At four o'clock, when he returned from one of these feverish rushings he found a phone call waiting—an utterly staggering call.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Memorial Hospital, in San Mateo, was calling Mark. They'd been calling half an hour.

The summons came with the merciless shock of judgment, as though his desperate thoughts had precipitated the tragedy now meted him.

Machine crowded off the highway—chauffeur and mother killed. Claire and her sister dying. They told him Claire was dying.

Mechanically he got his hat. He scraped a fleck of dust from the band with his thumb nail.

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Late that night he came knocking at Roen's door. He came blindly, almost pitching into the hall—searching her with his arms, holding her with cold, shaking arms.

He had come from Claire, from that white room, where on the white bed lay something that stirred and moaned, something that had been Claire.

All he could make out was her neat brown head and her delicate hands. Even her face completely hidden in bandages —like a mummy—a little white mummy.

But he spoke and she knew him. This crushed him utterly.

Once when he moved his hand, her fingers felt in a quick, frightened way along the bed for it and nestled in its clasp

like a birdling at rest. Yet clinging as though she was afraid to lose that hand. He might be thinking to leave.

He said, broken: "I won't run away. You recognize me, Claire—don't you? Rest—I'll be right here."

She wanted to speak. She urged him with the uneasy twittering of her fingers. She wanted to know. How were they? He guessed the anguish and terrible uncertainty—the stark images that must be in her mind—the overturned machine—the awful sounds coming from the wreckage.

He said: "The others are resting, too. They are better than you. Your mother is resting, Claire. And Hazel. I have seen them both."

Her fingers, tense on his, relaxed. That, too, was so trustful—as though she smiled.

Claire's mother was dead—killed instantly. Her sister had escaped with broken ribs.

But Claire had gone through the windshield and was frightfully cut by the flying glass. One leg was crushed. They did not know yet if she was internally injured; did not know if they could save her leg or how mortally her face was cut; did not know if she would live; or if she were going to die.

So he stood holding to Roen.

He needed comfort as Claire needed it. He was woefully stricken. Roen perceived the assault of his memories and, as though he were a boy, soothed him. "Dear Mark, you must bear it better than this. Ah—we have so little hand in destiny. Except to bear it well. Never let her know, Mark, dear. Now it is all decided for us. Now it is all chalked out. . . ."

He looked up slowly. Dumbly. His face, already blanched, became leaden. He stood backed to the wall, his arms limp.

"What did you say, Roen? All chalked out? How? What have you said?"

She, too, was pale, but her head and her strongly sculptured chin raised—the look about her that humbled him and now made him desperate; the look of majesty, of beautiful, passionate sweetness.

She went up and took his cold face in her hands, and murmured huskily, scarcely able to bear the hurt in his eyes: "I am only saying that you must be brave. Oh, Mark—we must both be brave—"

He stood in the dim passage, backed to the wall—the last wall in a world falling to wreckage. Her voice coming on a wind of desolation, withering the fibers of his heart. Be brave. Bid me good-bye. Bid love and your child good-bye. The way is clear. It is all clear to us now. Be brave—oh, braver than this. . . .

He reached out and covered her with his arms.

She moved from him, nodding, smiling. So quiet—so much more tragic than another's tears.

He saw boxes stacked in the hall. "Are these your things packed? You are not going?"

"I have been long about it. I had all Jackie's books to box."

He went over to those stacks of boxes, straightened one that was crooked on top of another. "Can you not wait? A little while? A few days—a week?"

"Could I help you, Mark? I meant to leave Saturday. I dare not wait longer. Oh, Mark—I can not wait longer!"

He passed his hand slowly over his face, hiding it from her pitying eyes.

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And now he was in Claire's dressing room, where she had so often flown in her little wounded rushes from his tormenting tongue. He must find her nightgowns—bring these to the hospital.

There they were, carefully buried in sachet—all she had not taken with her on the trip; dainty with the pink and blue ribbons and the gay French flowers worked into filmy lace. Bring these to Claire, who lay like a small white mummy—her childlike, appealing face crushed and marred yet who would not moan as long as his voice touched her ears.

He thought of her now as she wished him to be; as she was when long ago she tucked her hand in his and they went running to the garden for the shy, sweet rapture of their early kisses.

This Claire had years ago left him. But the Claire who was his wife and whom he had wished to put away, was now returned—was brought to him in desperate, heart-breaking plight.

He put the nightgowns into a suit case—almost smothered with his own labored breaths.

He had brought two women to utmost tragedy. And he could help neither. He could only stand there feeling in his heart a huge, thumping load, muttering desperately: "Leaving —Roen is leaving— Oh, good God!"

Three days he sat at Claire's bedside so loaded with his thoughts that he was sometimes in a stupor.

Would Claire live? Would she be hopelessly crippled and her pale, delicate face marred? Would she live on so, needing him always? Was she dying—freeing him in this brutal, unreckoned why?

To all this: "We cannot tell. Be patient. At best there is a long, hard fight—"

He sat holding her hand. Sometimes he imagined himself lifting Claire in his arms, carrying her gently home. And then going for Roen, saying insanely, "Come, too. Do not leave me, Roen. I will care for her. But you must stand with me. You must come with me."

At the end of each day he was wasted.

Friday night he went to Roen.

"You are going tomorrow, Roen?"

"Mark—I must. I have no time now—I would stay if I dared. I would help you. But you will make this fight . . . and I will make mine."

"Which is my fight, Roen?"

"Here—there is no question. You cannot desert her . . . and you would not, Mark . . ."

"I do not know!" He hid his face against her and was sobbing. "Before God, Roen, I do not know!"

* * * * * * *

Mark went with her to the train. They were early and walked down the tracks. But they didn't speak.

For in this last moment she was white with nervousness; in this last moment, she weakened. It now seemed monstrous that she must leave; that she was running away with the child and they two who were so vitally and immutably bound were forced to the parting.

She thought dazedly, "Come with me, Mark! You can bring Claire. Oh, let us all go far away together."

Suddenly his eyes were on hers with a wild pleading.

"I am coming to you, Roen. Before long I shall come."

"How? How will you?"

"Whatever the cost, whoever pays. I am coming."

"Do not have this unholy thought."

"Tell me how to escape it! God—how easy what I thought hard would have been in comparison! How easy now, Roen, to have met an ordinary issue."

She said faintly to goad herself to strength, "I would have gone alone in any case. In any case, Mark, it would be a full year before you could have come."

He, too, leaned against the freight, mumbling after her, "Yes—in any case a year."

And now the year might be stretched out to two—to three. He might never see Roen again. This might be their last meeting. He closed an icy hand over hers.

"A year. All that is bitter you must meet alone."

She said, softly, with a sudden wondrous softness in her face: "Ah, not alone, Mark!"

She looked off to a distant, white-flecked sky: "Not alone. This aids me. I am greatly aided . . ."

After a moment, as to herself: "Don't let me think of the terror. I want it glad. In spite of all it shall be glad! This will make it easy—that I want it strong—want it unstained by grieving—"

He bit his lips when she said these things and, although her eyes were now gently seeking his, he could not meet hers.

The train was in—the train was ready to leave. But he wanted to keep her from it.

He wanted blindly to follow her into the train; follow her out of existence. This would be right. This would be just.

She pushed her hands free of his savage grasp. "There, let me go! Mark—tell me good-bye!"

Her head suddenly flung back—the dark, vital eyes blinking—now they were smiling. Now she clung to his hand a moment. Now she said distantly and looking far away: "Oh—now—good-bye—"

She was waving—her head flung back—her hand waving. Going alone. Out of his life. Into her own—harsh, terror filled, alone.

He sat at Claire's bedside, assailed with terrible thoughts. He would sit there always.

And with each of these dragging weeks he would become more crazed with suspense. With each of these poisoning nights he would be riveted more deathlessly.

He would never escape. Roen was gone. He could not overtake her.

Mercifully Claire's eyes were bandaged. All the upper part of her face was bandaged. She could not see him.

She lay so quietly—so uncomplainingly. Her resolute, child-like mouth trying always to smile—always when he was there.

"Mark—how good you are! You must be tired—you need not come if you are.

"I never appreciated you—never knew how fine you really are. Mark, am I to be crippled?"

"They hope now to save you from this."

She lay so still he thought she had fallen asleep. But now her hand moved over the bed, feeling in that pathetic way for his.

"Mark—I am going to be blind!"

"God, no! What makes you say such a thing?"

"I know that I cannot see now."

"But you will. They will operate on your eyes later—"

"Do you really think I am going to live?"

"Yes—I think so . . ."

"But if this were so . . . if I am blind or crippled, it would be better to die. Better for you, Mark."

He took her little hands in his. He turned them gently, feeling so utterly stricken.

Better for him that Claire should die.

He shrank from the shocking thought. The walls about him were adamant—like this.

CHAPTER XXIX

CLAIRE was not going to die. She would live and need him always.

Slowly this fact was borne in upon him; slowly it began poisoning his heart.

Months dragged appallingly as he sat night after night at her bed; months flying in merciless haste, bringing Roen ever nearer to her perilous hour—bringing her to this, abandoned, alone.

Sometimes when he felt Claire's fingers moving with wistful inquiry over his palm; when he heard her sensitive appeal: "Mark, if I am to live, will you be truly glad? Even if I am crippled?" Sometimes when she would say this so trustingly, he would clench his hand over hers. He would think that he could not bear this; he could not go on so.

Images of Roen afflicted him.

Image of her fading from him—speeding away on the train, her voice echoing: "Oh, now—good-bye!"

He was prostrated knowing that he had let her go.

Claire's hand reaching up to his neck: "Mark—come nearer. Will you tell me the truth? Is my face horribly marked?"

"Only a little scar near your lip. No one will notice it."

"But my forehead, Mark? Yesterday when they changed the bandages I felt the scars."

"Your hair will cover that."

"How do my eyes look?"

"I have not seen them."

"Oh, tell me what they say!"

"Nothing yet—nothing definite. You can see. It is the stitches and the dark that has you frightened."

"Not that—not so much that, Mark. I think of you—what it may mean to you . . ."

"Do not think of me, Claire. You do not know what things will mean to me—"

And this terror that Claire might be blinded—that this little, delicate being who was proud and in many ways so high spirited might now be turned back to him so cruelly helpless weighed on him with a mighty anguish.

He stooped down once when she had appealed to him with her bitter need—when she had conjured for him an image of long, sightless years, moving about always her hand nestled in his—he stooped down hastily and kissed her little soft palm. He said: "Child, dear! This will not happen!" and moved his lips, stricken, along her palm.

A trembling went all through her; a sound half laugh and sob. After a long while she said faintly: "Mark—Mark, dear, I'll never forget that! What you did then and the way you said that!"

These things were breaking him. Like the day he moved her to the hospital in the city, she said eagerly: "Are you going to ride in the ambulance with me? Oh, I am afraid to go into a machine. But not with you. I just won't mind with you."

And she held so rigidly to his fingers. She said, shaking: "I'm really not frightened—not now."

Another time when she learned that her mother was dead, she moved toward him, asking for his arms about her. Gently she said: "Mark, I knew this. I heard my mother scream out —oh, an awful sound. I knew it was my mother and that she died, crying out like that. But it seems so strange to have your mother dead. Because your mother would always want you. Mark, how wonderful to know that someone cares, someone really wants you even if you're broken to pieces and not worth much. I would want you so! Ah—but I never really thought you'd stand like this to me, Mark."

Like a child putting a soft, trustful hand in his. She seemed all at once like his child that he could take into his home. And her presence there would be no bar to the presence of the woman he loved.

He was torn with this insane conflict.

The holidays drew near. One day as he came to the hospital Claire reached out gaily: "I stood up today. I am going to walk again—oh, some time! Mark, will you take me home for Christmas? The doctors say I can go for a few days."

"Ah—but I think I have to go away, Claire. On a short trip. Just after Christmas I'll be leaving."

"But they mean to operate on my eyes right then. That's why they'll let me go home just for these few days."

This was a shock. He had all along planned on a flying trip. He wanted to be with Roen at the last. It was nearing the last now.

She had gone to St. Louis, feeling that she could be better lost in a big city—one off the beaten schedule of trains and tourists. Once a traveling insurance man said haphazardly: "Oh, Bill keeps an extra wife in St. Louis. He's a cautious

lad. St. Louis is the town for a wild affair if you've got to be cautious. Not likely to meet anyone you ride the brakes with there."

This careless remark and the wish to get far from the state decided Roen's choice.

She took a little apartment here, waiting in mingled joy and sadness for the beginning of the new year that would indeed be the beginning of a new life for her.

* * * * * * *

Except for Mark's letters, Roen could have imagined herself transported to another world. In this complete isolation from the associations of her former life, it was easy to lose herself in a dream.

To forget she was a woman facing tragedy; to remember only she was a mother waiting in worshiping expectance the coming of her wildly-wanted child.

In these moods her thought melted off into longing and her whole being flowed out to it in love. She ached to hold it in her arms, to look in its face, to nestle it against her throat. What would it be? Oh, happy—infallibly gay like Jackie? Wistful—breaking her heart with wistful appeal like Mark? What was it like? What would it think and feel? She whispered, "Oh, hurry—hurry!" And could have wept with sheer, grateful joy.

Once she was shopping. A young girl standing at the same counter said timidly: "Don't these skirts look awfully small? I wonder if this is the right kind to get?"

Roen laughed happily: "Oh, they'll be quite big enough. But they say you should buy cotton—everything in cotton—like these."

"Oh, you've selected all those? I guess I'll take that kind, too." She followed Roen to another counter, saying chummily: "You seem to know quite a bit. You don't mind if I tag along?"

They went out of the store together. The young girl, whose name was Nancy Galton, said: "Are you afraid?"

"Of what?"

"The end. I am. My sister died with her first child and my grandmother died with my mother. I'd just hate to die."

"Oh, you won't! Death isn't strictly inherited, you know. That must be a coincidence. There's much more danger in crossing a street than in having a child. Then afterward—think of the joy."

Nancy glanced at Roen's glowing eyes. "Oh, you're wanting yours a great deal, I take it."

"Who doesn't? More and more as the time grows near."

"Many. My chum had her fourth yesterday. And she's only been married five years. They haven't the money. They don't know which way to turn. Rose didn't care if she died. She said she hoped she would die if she was just going to have one child right after another, year after year. That's just plain tragedy. I'd be afraid of that, too, wouldn't you?"

"Perhaps—but it would be so much more terrible to have none at all!"

"This is your first, too? That's the beauty of a first child, isn't it? Most people are fairly reconciled."

"Especially if they wait a long time. You see, I had to."

Nancy caught Roen's hand. "I'm glad for you, then, if you want it like this. I hope we both get good ones!"

Roen was grateful to this strange young girl—touched to be thus simply included: one of the happy mothers in a happy, sun-filled world.

Why should these others begrudge Roen her child? They who had so many that the coming of another would be reckoned tragedy. Why were they not quick to say, as Nancy did: "Oh, I'm glad for you if you want it like this!"

Why would they not admit that this which had happened to Roen was wondrous, an utterly ennobling thing, making her magnificent, filling her with such tenderness, that she stopped and talked to little children—the poorest of these now endowed with a kind of sacredness—that she smiled at strangers. And could easily have said to any who passed, could have said with melting exultance: "What do you think? I, too, shall have a child!"

She had the peculiar feeling that her child had all these years been waiting; that it was a prescient being who had deliberately chosen her from all the women in the world. She could never repay it for this miraculous preference.

And now, walking in the soft autumn evening, watching the brown leaves rustle across the street, or seeing the copper clouds go scudding through the twilight sky, she often felt her heart flush; she would walk very slowly lost in the glow and joy astir within her . . . listening everlastingly to soft, rapt music.

* * * * * * *

One day early in January, a letter came for her from Mark.

Mark couldn't come.

"Roen, they fear she will be blind. There is this one chance to save her sight—an immediate operation."

Pages and pages to soften this—pleading pages, worshiping pages.

Through it all this: Claire might be blind. Need him always. Her need first. Greater than any other need.

CHAPTER XXX

One cold, distracted day in January with a light snow blowing like petals in a wind, Roen went up the steps of the hospital.

Another woman was also entering—a very young woman. Her mother went with her and kept smiling at the girl and the husband, who was but a boy and very frightened. The mother said something in a warm, hearty tone. They all laughed, appearing so near to each other, so comforted with each other's presence.

Roen followed after them—alone, like a stranger in this inhabited, human earth.

She felt so chilled and nervous. "Your room is ready," said the girl at the desk, looking up Roen's name in a book. "The doctor phoned he will be here soon."

Mrs. Robert Jackson—this was Roen's name—the two names of her father. She felt that Bobby-dad would be glad to let her have them.

She went down the hall, into the elevator. She smiled distantly at the other woman who was also coming for her child. But this girl had grown very white. She was now saying sharply—her eyes not seeing Roen, or anything: "Mother—mother!"

They were given adjoining rooms. Roen sat on the edge of the bed, pressing her hands together. She felt drawn, anxious,

strained. She kept telling herself: "Today—it will be born today . . ."

She walked up and down swiftly, stopping now and then, clenching the bedposts, staggered by the sudden insensate sawing—the jagged sawing through her bone and flesh.

Then the girl in the next room screamed. She began screaming in the wildest indignation. She was wheeled down the corridor, sending these piercing, outraged protests backward.

Roen felt fainting.

Hours later when she had been lowered into a black pit and the walls of it were closing in on her—these walls were bayonets that came clashing together, meeting through the living barrier of her bone and flesh—then she was about to cry out to God against this infamous torture. But there was no God.

Not even memory. She forgot. She did not know why she suffered: why no one helped her to escape.

Someone leaned down—a face framed in white, an angel's face. This said to her: "Only a little longer. You'll have a dear little baby. Just think of that—keep thinking of that."

A seraph recalling the song—notes of it rushing through her heart. The song coming down into the pit—helping her—

And now she was coming back from the blackness—dimly—into a wavering light. The face again leaning down—the voice of incredible music: "You have a son—a dear little perfect boy—"

She was borne to the mountain tops—to a lighted mountain peak, a child laid in her arms, a little thing with its warm, soft face against her breast.

A son—her son. Wonderingly her hand framed the small,

downy head. There was a God now. Glad, exultant, mighty —a God who pushed the paltry world aside and with a laugh laid his gift in her arms.

She had her child. Yet each time it was brought to her, she marveled about it. She said to the nurse—Phyllis Hendricks:

"It's so homely, isn't it?" and thought it more lovable than anything in the world.

Sometimes falling into a fitful sleep she would find herself dreaming—defending her right to this joy.

Awaking she would fall to wondering how any woman who had ever borne a child could deny the right to any other. How is it that the mothers of the world are not rushing about with glowing, excited fervor telling one another of this undreamed-of rapture? Knowing themselves for the favored of God, since to them and to them alone is decreed the supremest of all ecstasies. Before this, all other rapture fails and is nothing.

How, then, does it chance that on the face of the infinite worlds—that anywhere in all the spheres there is one single woman voluntarily childless? One would as well expect to find them voluntarily hideous: voluntarily starved: voluntarily poor and enslaved. This must be the colossal failure of woman as a sex—that she fails to appreciate her overwhelming biological superiority. This is her inferiority.

These were her thoughts as she lay with the baby cradled in her arms. All her emotions were intensified as though now in place of five senses she had fifty. Her eyes saw new colors: in voices there were overtones of music, and every breath was elixir.

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Roen stood at the baby's crib lost in a wonder. It was 8 weeks old and it was smiling at her—really looking at her and smiling.

And this morning its fingers had played on her throat. It had looked up and smiled and made a long, happy cooing sound. All day she waited for a repetition of the marvelous utterance. All day that fragile sound went echoing like heavenly music in her thought.

Here alone—lost in this city—far from everyone who knew her, she was safe. This meant the child was safe.

She could stay on indefinitely. No one need ever know. Why, even years could pass without the slightest disturbing incident.

All her life she had lived in San Francisco. She had gone to school and worked. Often in whole months she had not met anyone from the past. Whole years glided away when she did not see girls that she went to school with; girls who were working in business offices in Montgomery street, a few blocks from her own office.

So she and her son could dwell here. After a while she would return to work. She would tell the boy his father was dead. They had loved each other greatly, but he had passed. Why should this arouse question? Young mothers have been widowed. Have their children looked on them with suspicion?

She stood at the crib, now leaning heavily on her hands. In cruel moments like this her problem confronted her.

She went over to the table and absently fingered a stack of letters. Dozens of letters from Mark. She would tell Mark's son that he was dead.

In a way, this would be the truth. He would be dead to them.

How this thought assaulted her! And how often, unbidden, there came to her mind the picture of Mark reclaiming them. Mark and the boy and she playing together along the beach, dashing into the waves, kneeling in the sand and building houses. As she had played with Evelyn's children that summer.

This was the vision of the future that came so unbidden and so bitterly persistent. She did not want to tell the boy that Mark was dead. She could not force her lips to say: "Mark, your father is dead—long dead."

She did not want to take her child into the barren isolation of a world that would be lonelier far than the world a widowed mother enters. Such a mother and her child are not alone! They are linked openly with the past. There is no hazy uncertainty about the story that fatherless boy should hear.

He has obvious connection with the laughing, living universe. There is his gay-eyed Uncle Jackie; there is his little cousin, Jackie's girl, 2 years old this month. The widowed Roen would have this that the unmarried Roen had lost. Convicting difference.

Jackie's letters troubled her as much as Mark's. They shoved the world more doomingly upon her.

Months ago she wrote this to Jackie, "Gregg Morse has sent me to St. Louis. I'm in charge of the branch here, and on the way to becoming a big business woman. I doubt if I dare leave it for a European sojourn. I get a bonus from all the business I do. I figure that I ought to work hard for the next six or seven years. Then I can retire. You know I've always

fancied myself a fat, jolly plutocrat like Tish Carberry. With advancing age the prospect grows delightful. Jackie, you can see what I mean and the wisdom of taking my chance while I have it. I don't like to think of lean, dependent years. So I'm not coming to visit you, but in a few years we can all go abroad. I'll be young enough to rejoice in belated adventures."

Jackie did not see her view. In every letter he coaxed and pleaded.

"Ron," said the one that came in the morning's mail, "it's not like you to get provident all of a sudden. It's against your whole philosophy to be storing up for barren years. How many thousands of times have you said, 'When I'm old all I want is a chair at a fire; when I'm old the vitality to enjoy will have vanished. Why fling away the full years—the years when the mere breathing of the spring air is a thrill—why fling these away for years that will be ghostly in their sweetness at the best?'

"So what are you giving me, Ron? Do you think Jinny and I enjoy ourselves more alone? You CAN'T think this! So what is it? Haven't you enough money? You should have that two thousand of Dearie's insurance. You're not afraid to squander it, Ron. You that wouldn't be guilty of saving a penny.

"If the expense worries you—think of the fun for the three of us worrying and pinching along together. God knows we've had a long acquaintance with Want. We know how to meet him. Ron—please come. It will be a lasting and really disastrous disappointment if you don't."

Whenever she thought of Jackie another solution of the future presented itself.

She could not eliminate Jackie. On his return he would search her out, let her be buried in the remotest wilderness.

So this plan came to her. She would return to her home. She would tell the truth to Jackie and Virginia. She would calmly tell them the child was hers—that she had long wanted it—that she loved the child's father, but he was not free to marry her.

But she had taken her child. And she was glad about it—

They would understand. They might regret, but they would champion her. To others she would say that she had married and her husband had died. She would remain away several years to make this plausible.

Why should anyone doubt it? She had always commanded honor. Why would she now be treated with suspicion?

This plan and variations of it went round and round in her thoughts. Perhaps it would be better to say she had adopted the child. Then no one would connect her absence with the child's birth and this belated announcement of a marriage.

When she had fabricated several stories, all of them seeming entirely convincing, there would come a whisper:

"But what of the child? You will give him a life-long lie? He will never have the satisfaction of knowing the real facts?"

* * * * * * *

"And what of me?" came the voice of Mark. "Will you take from me permanently all hope of claiming my son? Roen, wait! Roen, give me a chance."

Then Mark wired he was coming. Coming for a look at his child.

The middle of April—oh, one of those perfumed, singing

days like the many that last spring had disturbed Roen's heart with a wounding beauty.

* * * * * * *

He was coming. This afternoon he would be here.

She held the baby on her lap. It now seemed to her more beautiful than any cherub-face, visioned by the greatest artists —lovely with a divine, sweet wisdom like the face of the little Christ. Her heart was always bursting with a proud, wild love of it—a gratitude.

Now it laughed—its dark, fine eyes were laughing. She wanted it to laugh like this when it looked at Mark.

And it did! He knelt as she held it in her lap. He turned his face that she might not see it. And without again raising his head, he took the boy— He walked with it to the door.

Standing with his back to her, he spoke. He said in a voice she did not recognize: "Roen—here is a greater right than any other right. Here is the only right—"

CHAPTER XXXI

Roen watched with full, breaking heart the picture Mark made with the child in his arms. He stood so, back turned, and his head lowered. From the muffling of his voice it might be he was crying.

He saw himself—oh, clearly in the tiny thing's dark eyes and definite features, in its mobile, now laughing mouth. He held it mutely and knew not whether these stricken pangs were grief or all exultance.

Now his hand passed over the baby's head—dark head like his own. And now he gave a choked, abrupt laugh, for the baby suddenly cooed and, being delighted with the sound, repeated it, drawing its voice deep into its throat, almost strangling himself with the effort to prolong the astonishing wheeze.

Roen knew the look of satisfied pleasure that always accompanied this performance; a look that made a person of the child, a dear, winning little person who seemed to say with sly humor: "Now, that was pretty fine, eh? I'm coming along!"

She saw Mark grip the baby's hands. She longed to comfort him because his pain, too, was great.

She stole up and smiled in Mark's goaded eyes. She took the child and laid it in its crib. She said, gazing at it gently: "There will be a way."

But he had held his son in his arms. And the small, downy

head in the hollow of his hand. The claim of this little being for whom he was responsible became insuperably greater than all other claims.

He said to Roen, but not looking at her: "I see what I should do. This I must do."

Her heart forced out the question. "But if she needs you so? Mark, if she is blind?"

He mumbled, protestingly: "No matter what I do, someone is wronged!"

He grew more and more silent. For Roen was calm. She told him the future she had marked out for herself. She could meet it. Let him not fear. The child would be protected. All her years she would fight to make the path easy for the proud, happy boy their son would surely be. This would be her fight. He must stick to his.

He got up suddenly and was walking about the room. He stopped with his back to her, his hands thrust over his face. He said thickly: "I cannot bear it! Roen—don't disown me. Wait—give me a chance."

She dared not say how wildly she longed that he might claim his son: that he might fold them both in his arms, laughing, free—rightly theirs and they rightly his. It seemed so natural, so incontestably just that they should be together; they three, who were truly one . . . whose need for each other was like the need of the body for its heart, intrinsic, vital.

There were times that even at the cost of wantonness, she would have protected her child; even with the sacrifice of another, she would let her son be saved.

* * * * * * *

But she stood at the door when Mark was leaving. She let

him take her hands and draw her close so that she looked silently into his suffering, pleading eyes.

"Roen, you will wait? Take no drastic step! Don't tell Jackie. Don't shut me out—yet.

"Roen, I so love you. I so need you. I need the thought of you. Trust me for a while. Don't you trust me, Roen?"

"Oh, yes—"

He was pale, and his features seemed drawn very sharp. She could not bear the living plea of his eyes. Nor when he said: "I can perhaps find a way easy for all—better for all—"

She said, shaken, but her lips still smiling: "Ah, Mark—perhaps!"

* * * * * * *

Mark went slowly up the steps of his home—slowly and heavily.

For four days as the train flew he had lost himself in the thought of Roen; had kept seeing her beautiful eyes filled with maternal, gentle pity for him equally as for her child.

And time and again he had felt that little cooing being in his arms: had seen himself in the definite features: had told himself, awed, exultant: "Mine! My son!"

With these images, there arose tenaciously the hope of escape. Incredible that he would give Roen up—give up his boy. Let them go starkly from his life? No! A way would be found.

He put his key slowly, noiselessly in the latch. He went softly down the hall.

He dreaded the meeting with Claire—she would raise her face illumined with a smile of trust to his.

Poor little Claire who was his wife. Yet for whom he felt

only a great pitying impulse of protection as though she were his child—a little, needing child.

Quietly he pushed the door to the dining room. Half hidden by the portière, he paused. He paused because of horror.

Claire was sitting at the table. She wore great black glasses that made her face unearthly in its delicate pallor that made so terribly appealing the proud, yet wholly sensitive mouth.

Now Claire's mouth was quivering. She had her head raised as though she tried to speak but could not for the tears rushing to the corners of her lips.

An empty cup was in Claire's hands; the coffee from it had splashed on the table, splashed in Claire's lap.

The nurse mopped this up. She stood over Claire, mopping it angrily and saying: "Couldn't you wait! I told you to wait! You've ruined another cloth and your dress. Now just stop that crying and eat your dinner!"

She took a napkin and was about to tie it about Claire's neck. She kept scolding.

Mark pushed the portières and, with a rush, snatched the napkin from the woman's hand.

"Get out of this house! Get out this moment!"

He flung the napkin to the table: "I said for you to leave! I don't care to hear a word!"

He lifted Claire gently, put an arm about her. She flung herself sobbing against him. She said, incoherent: "Mark! Dearest Mark!"

That night when he sat in the living room, he felt Claire in the room. He turned and saw her coming toward him—coming with her hands reaching out—feeling her way.

He sprang up and took her hands. She stole into his arms.

"Did she abuse you all the time, Claire? All the time I was gone?"

Claire laughed happily: "I'm not abused, Mark—not now. Miss Brian was an angel. But she had to leave. This woman came. She didn't understand, Mark. She thought I was just trying to provoke her. It's hard for others to know what it is like to be as I am. I mean that others can't understand how strange it is to have everything so dark—always. I keep thinking I can find my way—I can serve myself. I make all these annoying blunders.

"Do you know what it's like, Mark? You do, don't you? Have you really changed, Mark—or was I blind at heart before and now that I am only blind in my eyes I see you rightly?

"It must be hard for you, Mark. I failed you long ago, didn't I? Now, you are not failing me. . . . Oh—except for you I shouldn't mind this. . . . Mark, will you kiss me, if you wish—"

And her hands like birdlings coming to nest in his.

He thought: "God—Oh, God!"

CHAPTER XXXII

Now, with Claire's little hands seeking his; resting in his so happily: now with her saying: "But it is not dark with you here, Mark. I mean that I feel bathed in light. In all these months you've not once been impatient. Not once made me feel a burden to you"—with this appeal of her, he was crushed.

"And I'd know if you were resenting me, Mark. I'd feel it in a moment."

"Why, in God's name, would I resent you, Claire?"

"You don't, do you?" she laughed gaily and, putting out her hand, felt the fire's warmth. She led him to the big chair, sitting on a little hassock at his feet.

And with her neat brown head turned a moment to the fire, she went on talking in a lulling, absent tone: "No, you don't resent me. And you might. Without even meaning to—unconsciously. The nurse didn't mean to slap me like that . . ."

"I didn't see her slap you!"

"Oh—perhaps before you came, then. It wasn't much—just a movement of impatience. It didn't hurt, except I was humbled to be slapped. It made me cry. It made me know I am unpleasant to have about.

"Oh, Mark, I can easier bear blindness than the thought of becoming an annoyance—an offensive person—offensive to you, Mark—

"I think of this. I think of the long years and that it may prove too hard for you."

Her hands were clasped on his knees—pressed tightly palm to palm. And she now turned her face upward—little movements—movements of pain on her lips.

"Mark, I can bear the blindness even if it is to last . . . but that other—your feeling me a deadening burden, ah, that I could never bear."

He leaned down quickly, in a frenzy to shut out the sight of her delicate quivering mouth: he leaned down and promised in a breathless anguish: "I won't frown on you, child. Why would I frown on you?"

She put out her hands, searching for his. "Mark—you think of me differently, don't you? You don't think of me any more as your wife, do you? But as a child. Isn't it strange that this makes me want to cry? And yet it makes you seem wonderful. It makes me glad.

"Might it be, Mark, that all this that has happened is for the best?"

She asked this softly, smiling and pressing his hands against her lips.

And not even to his wildest thought could Mark then murmur: "Wait! A way will be found—a better way for all—"

* * * * * * *

Nor did he think it as he now went down into months that were blinder for him than for Claire.

He only saw her as she would come into the hall in the evenings, her hands feeling out eagerly for his.

He only felt her head coming joyously to rest against his

shoulder when he took her driving. Things she said were whips that laid unhealing wounds on his spirit.

"Mark, is the sun going down now? Are there many colors in the sky? Is there a lovely green out there edged with amber? You know sometimes I grow afraid that I may forget what the world looks like. Strange, isn't it, but I can always see your face. Not as I used to see it. I see it thinner now, I see such a look in your eyes, oh, kind as God might look—I see that always, Mark—"

One afternoon he came home earlier than usual. He found Claire in the living room, books and papers before her. She tried to hide these, hearing his step.

She was too late. She said, timidly and flushing: "Laura has been here. You know, Mark, I'm studying the braille. Laura has learned it to help me. You see—I want to be able to read. And she says she'll translate all the new books into braille for me—any book I like she'll transcribe."

He came over softly and picked up her papers. He was so pierced by this that he could not speak.

In the beginning Claire's friends had come in flocks. They vied with each other in showing her attention. When she was convalescing they read to her. Later they took her driving.

But as the months went halting along and the routine of their own days again absorbed them, Claire was gradually neglected.

One friend would say to another: "Have you been to Claire Conrad lately? Poor thing—I just can't stand the thought of her terrible affliction. I don't go because it just lays me flat for days."

And the other would answer: "I must run in on her to-

morrow. I meant to ask her to the last symphony. I completely forgot it."

So that of the whole group Laura Thompson alone was faithful. Laura, whom Mark had never liked and in whose presence he could not restrain his cynical humor: Laura, with her china-blue eyes and pompous manner, came every day.

And she came because she really loved Claire. She told her minutely of the plays she had seen. She read hours to her. She brought her all the spicy gossip. She sometimes insisted on taking Claire to town with her. And she bought all Claire's clothes, giving up days to search out the style of thing Claire would like.

Finally she had studied braille and encouraged Claire in this.

"How long?" asked Mark dumbly, "how long, Claire, have you been at this?"

"About two months."

"But you told me you could see a little, lately."

"I can tell if I'm standing in a very strong sunlight. Sometimes I think I see the glimmer of an object."

"Doesn't that mean your sight is improving? You will not be blind."

She sat like a small, white statue, her head lowered, her fingers moving sensitively over the dots on the page before her.

"Mark—almost a year has gone. I do not see. Are you counting on the time when I am cured? Does this make it easier for you?"

"Of course!"

"And when you learn that I may not. Mark—then what—?"

He lost even the echo of her voice in the sudden hushed desolation of his thought. Then what!

This day he had received in a letter from Roen a picture of his son . . . not the helpless infant he had seen four months ago—but a most engaging little being, who had discovered his toes, and now in hilarious grinning joy stuffed all five of them in his mouth at once.

"You can see how he does it, Mark. It must be wonderful to be a child with a creative joy in every movement. If only you could have seen his face when he discovered the knob of the door near his crib. He pulls himself toward it and turns it—and looks at me with a laugh that I almost believe is conscious triumph. . . .

"I am teaching him to say your name. All his lovely black hair is gone and a yellow mop in its place. But his eyes and lashes are dark—they are yours. He's not beautiful, I know, but I never saw a child, except Jackie, who is so thrillingly sweet. When I put my cheek against his, he lets it be there as though he understands the comfort.

"Mark, I didn't mean to write that. Now you will think me sad. I am not. I cannot be. He has just dropped a rattle from his bed and is laughing with delight. I am not sad. It is easy for me to shut out thought. I go over and take him in my arms. He squeezes his hands on my neck.

"I forget everything. I know only that I have my son in my arms.

"But the time is flying. Soon I must come to a decision. Before Jackie returns. . . .

"It will be so much better, Mark. By the end of the year —by then I must surely take some definite stand—"

His hand now closed on the letter. By the end of the year he would be disowned.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CLAIRE would be blind. There was no hope. Her sight was gone.

Mark listened to the doctor, hearing sharply each careful word. Breathing down these words as though they were knives.

He protested in a gasp: "But she sees the glimmer of objects."

"No, Mr. Conrad, she does not. She thinks, at times, that she does. Have you noticed it is always some very familiar object in some very familiar place she fancies she is seeing? She is only visualizing in her memory.

"There was but a thread of hope from the start. Even if there were a chance now, her heart would not endure the strain of another operation. Any further shock to your wife will be fatal. She has been cruelly overtaxed.

"There is no hope for her sight. You must help her to make the best of it."

He nodded. He stood there stupidly and nodded. He must help Claire to make the best of it. For she was blind. She would be blind always.

He went blundering to the door.

* * * * * * *

It was two o'clock of a stormy November day. Roen waited for her baby to awaken.

For ten months now she had watched him as he slept, sometimes so wrapped in the wonder of her possession and that at last the child had been given her—so tremulous with this that she lost trace of time. She would bend down and frame the downy head in her hand, or she would touch the warm, silky fingers.

Now, as she smoothed the straight, golden hair, so floss-like yet already turning black again, the baby stirred. She never got over the thrill of his look as he awakened. He would open his eyes slowly, a smile spreading over his mobile lips.

He would lie a moment so, smiling at her—a sly, joyous look in his dark, hazel eyes. Then he would pull himself up by the sides of the crib and begin to coquet with her—ducking his head, coming up again suddenly—in an ecstasy if she would make some sharp, guttural sound.

She spent whole days playing with him—at night longing for the morning—longing to see his head poked over the high rail of the bed—longing to hear his babble that every day grew more intelligible. She would listen to him practicing sounds—saying over and over a syllable he had mastered. Each morning he went through regular drills.

Listening to this, she would murmur fearfully: "How can I regret?"

She could not. She could only stand at a crib waiting for her little child to awaken, her heart bursting with the pain of an infinite compensation.

She could only stand there looking into the little tanned face that, except for the brown, silky brows, was the face of Mark—stand looking at this and longing to feel the soft, dear cheek against her own.

Whenever she held her baby she had the odd idea that he understood her need. He was so satisfying—so cuddling—so much more so than Evelyn's baby who had only endured a caress.

The little Mark was like Jackie had been—winsome, infallibly gay. He sucked his third and fourth fingers. Knowing that Roen would take them from his mouth, he would hide the guilty hand with the other or he would pull the sheet half over his face, his eyes tricky with delight.

When she would go right up and pull them from him, saying reprovingly: "I caught you! I see!" he would laugh. When he was very tired, he would hide against her throat and vehemently suck the comforting fingers. She remembered the feel of Billie in her arms—remembered the feel of Jackie. She would hold her own child with exultant tenderness. Hers—that she would not lose!

Sometimes she wondered why all women who long for children do not have them. Why had she, for so many years, endured that wild, gnawing want?

Safe in her lonely isolation, Roen could flame with these thoughts. She could hug her own baby close and wonder why all the women in the world were not banded together to glorify and welcome the coming of all—all children.

She could project a beautiful Utopian world where mothers would count it overwhelming shame should there be found one neglected or unwanted baby.

She could laugh in the little boy's face. She could take his two small hands and press the palms against her cheeks, asking, half weeping: "How can I regret?"

But as the year drew to a close and she read in Mark's letters

his anguish and distraction of spirit; as she felt more and more her own exile, she grew quiet. This lulled, half-wild absorption in her child would not be permitted to last.

Just before Christmas came a letter from Jackie. He wrote:

"Ron—wonder if you remember that Geoffrey North and his wife are living in St. Louis. You always liked Geoff. He travels with an interesting crowd, the kind of people you'll find wonderfully stimulating. I wrote him and enclosed your address. So, he'll be looking you up, and that will make your stay there pleasanter. Let me know if he calls and when. You don't mention any friends you've made. Are you playing any golf? What do you do with yourself?"

She held this letter blankly. The page and the room and the baby playing on the floor swam together in a fog.

* * * * * * *

She had just started to undress the baby. He was romping about the couch, one shoe off and one shoe on. He was crowing in delight at evading her.

The bell rang. She put the baby in his bed and went to open the door.

The baby dropped the book she had given him and cried out for it.

She went back and picked it up. The bell rang again—then again.

Roen hurried. She had her hand on the knob when she heard a man's voice. She recognized the voice. It was Geoffrey.

"I guess there's no one home."

"Why, yes—I heard footsteps. There's a baby crying. . . ."

A girl saying that—probably Geoffrey's wife. "Ring again."

And suddenly the woman in the next apartment saying, "Why, yes—Mrs. Jackson's home. I just saw her go in."

"We're looking for Miss Roen Ross."

"Oh, that's her friend, I suppose—her mail comes there. Is the bell broken?"

Ringing again—then again—and the woman next door suggesting: "Wait a moment, I'll get the manager. I know Mrs. Jackson is home."

CHAPTER XXXIV

The neighbor, Mrs. Berry, determined that Goeffrey North and his wife should gain entrance, repeated her ghastly suggestion:

"I'll run down and get the manager. She has a passkey. Most likely the bell doesn't ring."

And now the baby began to cry—cried out loudly.

"You see, she's home! She never leaves the child alone!"

Almost lifeless, Roen waited for Geoffrey's answer. If the manager should come up and open the door? If Geoffrey should see Roen here with her child about whom Jackie, her own brother, knew not a thing? Geoffrey to come sauntering in and find Roen in hiding under an assumed name; find her white and collapsing against the wall.

Above the thunder of blood roaring in her ears came at last Geoffrey's answer: "No—never mind. Perhaps Mrs. Jackson is busy. It's Miss Ross we want to see. I'll leave a note for her."

And after a timeless void, the white card thrust under the door. Steps going down the passageway.

Moist, slumping, Roen felt her way back to the bedroom. She lifted the baby in her arms, clasping him to her in a frenzied embrace. She murmured: "Oh, hush! Sweetheart, hush!" She wrapped him in a soft, woolen blanket, and sat rocking him; murmuring incoherent love in the tired little

ears until he fell asleep with his wet, pursed lips against her throat.

Finally she laid the baby down. She went creeping through the dark hall and found the note under the door. It was scribbled on a sheet torn from a memorandum and addressed to Roen Ross, care of Mrs. Robert Jackson.

"Dear Ron—we've been on your trail for the last month. Where on God's green earth do you eat, sleep, etc.? Anyway, we want you for Christmas dinner and have Jackie's guarantee that you've not made any other date. We're having some real people in and think you'll enjoy meeting them. Please come. Give me a ring in the morning, will you? Eagerly anticipate a reunion."

By a mere breath she had escaped.

Roen sat with her head flung back, her eyes closed. She felt weak with a cruel physical exhaustion.

Suddenly she thought: "I can't stay here."

Geoffrey would call again. He would inquire where she was working and might drop in to this fictitious office in the intention of taking her to his home for dinner.

He would insist on introducing her to his friends—young doctors. She might meet some of those she had encountered at the hospital. By some wild chance she might be remembered.

She got up numbly and walked from room to room, knowing that she must pack her things and go . . . loath to do this.

Roen stared into the suitcase she was packing—the suitcase of her baby's clothes—her baby whom she could not acknowledge and to protect whom she would now flee from this city and now from that.

She went to his bed and looked at him. He was curled up

snug as a little snail, his knees against his chin. Gently she took his fingers from his mouth, closed his lips. A smile spread over them—the angel—she longed to lift him in her arms, fling open the door and shout: "Mine!" Trumpet it to the farthest heaven! Hers—her God-given little child.

She saw herself doing this—holding the child aloft—proclaiming him.

Why did she not do this? Why had she not opened the door serenely to Geoffrey; serenely announced: "I am here—and here is my son. MINE! Let who will gainsay my right!"

Often in the hectic discussions at Jackie's they had talked this very thing. Then Roen had said: "If women were truly brave—if women were mothers in a bigger and finer sense, long centuries ago the ban against the coming of a child, no matter how, would have been obsolete. Fancy a race of superbeings putting an embargo on birth!"

Fancy an animal ostracizing its young! Only the moral human is inspired to bully and outrage its defenseless children.

And Roen had theorized then that a strong woman would be magnificently immune to criticism. If she brought her child here, unauthorized, she would be fearless about it—proud, unassailable in her right.

She would be as Roen now longed to be; as she now visioned herself going out into the world, saying to everyone: "I am the mother! Here is my child!"

This would not be difficult for her. It would be far easier than this sneaking away in the night. It would be courageous. Her heart thrilled to the thought in a surging defiance. Battle for her child! Be strong for her child!

She stooped down and let the baby's warm, sweet breath

drift against her cheek; she framed his head with a loitering adoration in her palm.

She knelt a long while like this, gazing into the tanned, winsome face; stroking the fine, silky brows.

Her heart was bursting. Into her brain, searingly alert, there came oppressive recollections. She recalled especially an item she had read in the newspapers years previous. The story of a girl who had a little boy. And her friends knew the child was fatherless.

He was about seven years old—a sensitive, handsome lad. At school one day another child called him a name. With the derisive callousness of childhood, other boys took up the censure, so that this one child was marked out. One afternoon he disappeared.

That night the frantic mother found him. In the basement —hanging by a rope. He had killed himself—strangled out the unbearable anguish of life.

Roen buried her head on the pillow, closing her hand on the baby's.

There was always this side of it—how would the child react to his mother's defiance. How would the child like this open brand?

Would he be strong enough to mock an ungracious world's sneer? Would it be fair to demand this of a little boy? Would it nurture the sweet, joyous kindliness she so wanted in her son?

Easier for her, perhaps. Who knew how blighting for the child?

Midnight she wrote to Geoffrey. This letter she would mail after she was safe in a new hiding-place.

"So sorry I missed you. Your letter forwarded to me here in Chicago, where I will be for the next month, when I may be sent on to New York or back to San Francisco. How I should have delighted to be with you on Christmas. I warmed my soul with memories on that blessed day. Your note only reached me this morning."

That would be better—wait till all chance of the meeting had passed.

The next morning Roen sent her boxes to Chicago. In the night, protected by the darkness, she took her child and left.

She could have wept at this stealthy flight. Criminals flee so, looking furtively to see who watches. She was like them. Because she had this little warm, loving bundle in her arms—her child, who had waited these seventeen years for her welcome.

After days of searching she found a snug place in the suburbs. She wrote to no one—not even to Jackie.

But this could not go on. Of course not!

The postoffice forwarded her mail. Early in February came this from her brother, "By the end of March, at the latest, we'll return. We're stopping off at St. Louis. We'll carry you back with us, Ron!

"At any rate, we'll have a high old week or two with you. Wait till you see our gadget! She talks French like a native and knows that I don't. Ron, ole dear, get your work cleared up so that you can give us a run of it. Longing to see you. I'll wire when we land."

He would scour the earth till he found her. Now she must take her stand.

CHAPTER XXXV

JACKIE was going to that apartment in St. Louis to visit Roen—to spend a high old week with her.

He would learn that Mrs. Robert Jackson had left with her baby just before Christmas. And no one knew where she had gone; that no one had ever seen Roen Ross though letters for such a party were received by Mrs. Jackson.

Instantly Jackie would seize on that name—"Robert Jackson"—his name and Bobby-dad's.

Strange coincidence that Roen should live with a woman by this name—stranger still that she had never mentioned this friend. So much she had not foreseen! So many little details tracking her!

They would describe Mrs. Jackson—a tall, notable figure, with her flying chestnut hair, dark eyes and long, silky eyebrows whose peculiar auburn gave such startling color to the face.

And Jackie would begin cruelly to wonder. He would search out Geoffrey—with each clue becoming more mystified, more pinched at the heart.

Frightened he would begin the checking up. He would look for Gregg Morse's branch office. Finding no such place, he would frantically wire Morse and demand his sister's whereabouts.

To be told that Morse thought her joyously in Europe with

her brother! She had never been in St. Louis on business for him.

Suspicion would become rapidly a blasting, incredulous certainty.

Let it once dawn on Jackie that Roen and Mrs. Robert Jackson were one, he would move the heavens to make sure.

He would visit every hospital in the city. He would get in touch with Phyllis Kendricks, Roen's nurse. By a hundred marks Phyllis would identify Roen. She need only mention the blood-red ruby on the fourth finger of Roen's left hand. Jackie would know.

Her brother would try to find her—would have her movements traced. But he didn't know her address here. She would move again so that not even the postoffice could locate her. And if she remained silent, she would be as one lost.

For a long while Roen sat mutely, pondering this. They would know she had purposely disappeared. They would know Roen had a child and was slinking away to hide it.

And all she would gain would be lifelong, futile loss of Jackie! lifelong isolation from all relatives for her child.

She safeguarded nothing and solved nothing by a silent disappearance. Let Jackie visit that apartment in St. Louis and her whole secret would be bared. After all, what worse than this could happen?

Roen sat on the floor, building blocks into a lofty tower. The baby, who could now run about, stood on the threshold, one foot raised, his little body taut with suspense. He waited till the structure reached a dizzying height. Then he came dashing across the room, and with a rapt, sudden gurgle, struck all the blocks down.

He did this now. Roen caught him in her arms. He reached for a block, handed it over with the bland smile of a little king who knows his orders are understood.

"You build it," said Roen, shaking back her head.

As she remained listless, the child crept to her, poking his face with gracious inquiry near to hers.

She smiled. He reached up and caught her nose vigorously in his thumb and forefinger, wanting her to say in a high, nasal tone: "Na-na!"

This astounding trick was his own invention. She found him, one morning, holding his nose, repeating again and again —"Na-na." He experimented with the sound, now with his fingers holding his nose, now with his nose free. He found the contrast uproariously funny and would laugh himself into hiccoughs over it. Sometimes in the middle of the night, when Roen leaned down to cover him, he would reach up and clutch her nose—even though half asleep, giving a gleeful murmur.

She would almost cry with the joy of his infectious laughter, but now as he kept poking toward her, tweaking her nose and ordering whimsically, "Na-na!" she caught him in her arms and carried him to the window.

A rain went whipping down the street. Drops raced down the window pane. The baby leaned over and stuck out his tongue to gather them. He looked delightedly at Roen and informed her: "Wa-wa—" She was surprised that he could identify the rain as water.

She pointed to the gray, gusty downpour. Oh, on days like this, Roen longed for home; longed for the green, grassy park and eucalyptus trees with their slender, graceful branches and their moist acorns that one crushed for many years under one's

foot—that one had stepped upon when life and love were high like a song in the throat.

She longed more than anything else for her garden where the hyacinths and daffodils would now be blooming . . . the little secluded garden where she might sit with the gay little boy at her feet, where Jackie might come and bring his gadget to play with hers.

This would never be. Roen put her finger over the baby's and slowly traced the raindrops.

It would do no good to evade Jackie. She would write today and tell him she was transferred to Chicago. Then she could take a room at a hotel and during his stay leave the baby with a nurse.

At this prospect she grew faint. Leave the baby for a week. Perhaps two? In a stranger's care?

Then the next time Jackie might come to visit? Or suppose he should know some doctors here and introduce her?

Endless, endless evasion. Endless lies. She might hide the existence of her child indefinitely from Jackie; from everyone.

There would be lurking always the possibility of a chance discovery.

And she did not want to hide the child—did not want to lead him into a dark world of falsity and deceit.

She wanted her child to romp in the garden; she wanted him to be chuckling with happy, unfailing mirth. She wanted him safe in a cosy, joyous home—acknowledged and beloved. He was no sad little thing that one would hide away!

She wanted to go back to her cottage because here would be a natural, wholesome environment. Here the boy would have Jackie for his uncle and the little Roen for his cousin.

The more she thought, the more sane, the more inviting was this way.

She would return to her work and have the nurse, Ulla, care for her son. Ulla had been with Billie and was a fine, joyous creature. Then after a long interval when the likelihood of her absence being linked with the baby's birth had passed, she would merely announce that she was adopting the boy.

No one would think it odd. She had always been talking of taking in some stray waif or other.

What she would tell the child itself—ah, that was another heartbreak. But that could wait.

To Jackie she would tell the truth. The boy was hers! She would tell Jackie this because she shrank from the thought of his discovering it should she withhold the facts. But, chiefest of all she would tell Jackie because she felt with an unerring faith that he would guard her child as she had guarded him If it were Roen's boy—that would make it a sacred trust to Roen's brother. She felt certain of this.

The beginning would be hard— Jackie would know the baby's age. Unconsciously he would check back. Without doubt he might come to the knowledge that Mark was the baby's father.

This Roen would not tell him.

But she would have to risk the discovery. Of all the ways she saw, this way from the child's standpoint seemed the kindest.

She now became excited—cruelly apprehensive of some flaw she had not foreseen. All behind her she had left innumerable clues.

Another reason why she would tell Jackie all—she would have his whole-hearted protection. No one would dream of doubting Roen Ross.

So she would tell no flimsy tale of a marriage, thus laying herself open immediately to challenge.

She prepared for the homeward trip. In the afternoon before she started she wrote to Mark.

He sat in his office with the door locked. He read Roen's letter as a man reads a sentence of death.

Then he, too, took his stand.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"WHAT is troubling you, Mark?"

He came upright with a start. Always sensitive to his moods; always proudly reserved, Claire seemed now at times clairvoyant—seizing the thoughts warm from his brain.

He regarded her with haggard, astonished eyes.

It was two days since Roen's letter reached him. And for two days, flaring back and forth in his mind went the image of Roen getting on the train—Roen coming to the city, bringing the baby with her.

Ending all definitely—ultimately—passing irrevocably from his life.

And Claire asked gently—sweetly: "Mark—what is troubling you?"

She had her delicate and now almost transparent hands clasped under her chin; the big, dark glasses making her so tragically appealing. And she was smiling.

In these days, so much happier than the Claire of other years—the Claire who really had things to be glad about. Gayer, too, than the prudish, injured figure standing tense before her dresser, slipping the rings from her finger and asking in a grieved tone: "Do you speak flippantly of sacred things just to hurt me? Just to belittle me?"

That Claire was gone—and this slim, pale, smiling figure in her place—the Claire of 17 who had seized his hand and gone

running into the garden for the rapt, first kiss of love.

She had slipped back to her girlhood and was radiant in it. He could almost forget she had ever been his wife.

Now she closed the books her thin, sensitive fingers had been studying and came toward him, feeling her way delicately.

"Is my bench there, Mark? At your feet?"

Her hands clasped on his knees, her face looking up with a smile to his. "You don't answer me, Mark. Strange, you appear to me as through you had been running and running until your eyes were sunk."

"You can't see me, Claire."

"But I can feel you. It is I who trouble you so? But why. Just because I don't see?" She gave a joyous laugh. "You have almost made me glad for this, Mark. You have more than made it up to me."

He looked into her face illumined with a smiling, childlike trust and thought of the thing he planned to do to her. He sat limp and inarticulate like a man huddling against a merciless beating.

* * * * * * *

Early that gusty March evening Roen arrived at the depot. She wore a big drooping black hat and held the baby very tightly in her arms. He was heavy and wanted to look about —wanted to point to the trains, to the passing machines. He saw a big dog and called out excitedly: "Bow-wow!" and struggled to get down and run after it.

Roen said shakily: "No—no—look, we'll run now!" and kept repeating to herself: "Train 71—compartment 4—"

And for three days she didn't move from her compartment. It was hard amusing the child in this little space. He kept

going to the door, reaching for the knob and looking back to her with a winning: "Bye-bye?"

She cajoled: "Only a little longer, angel baby! Then we'll see the auto and the meow and the bow-wow. Then everything in the world will be lovely—lovely—lovely—"

But as the train neared San Francisco, a terriblc lassitude came over her. She now asked incessantly:

"Shall I tell Jackie? No!"

Half swooning with this hacking problem, she came back always to this strong point: "But if I die—what would Jackie care for an adopted child? Who would look out for you, angel baby, then?"

The child poked his fingers in her tears.

She waited till everyone was off the train . . . so that she missed the boat and took a later one.

She sat on the outside, where the lights were dim, and wrapped the baby in a great coat.

Hundreds of people passing in these boats every hour. She looked over the rail to the water.

No one spoke to her. No one rushed up and said: "Roen Ross! Well—what are you doing with a baby? Whose is it?"

This was, none the less, a horror in her thought.

* * * * * * *

And now the taxi stopping at the little cottage in Oak street—

Now Roen murmuring to the sleepy little boy: "I've brought you home—oh, darling baby, now we're home."

Inside were flowers and the fire ready and the place cleaned.

He had done this—Mark had seen that it was ready.

And now he came down the hall. Now he wrapped the

two of them in his arms. And she trembled because of his shaking breath—because of his bowed head and his face wet against hers.

Roen whispered in the baby's ear: "Run to him. That's Markie. Say, 'Markie!'"

The little boy looked at her fixedly, shaking his head with smiling finality. He would not. He buried his face in her skirt. Suddenly he glanced up coyly and pointed to Mark. He said with elfish inquiry: "Marbie?" and went running across the room to fling his arms about Mark's knees.

Mark was overcome by this and with a short, choked sound folded the baby to him.

Roen watched in a glow.

She was mere mother now, primitive, majestic—brimming with pride and love because of her little child that she thought so quaintly beautiful with his gray, dreamy eyes and fine blond hair.

She glanced at him as he cuddled against Mark's shoulder listening to the ever-fascinating tick of a watch—looking up to say with that winsome triumph, "Tick-tick!" She saw Mark's hand go loitering over the little head—but she could not see Mark's face.

She walked over and raked the fire and whispered to it. The child would be happy and free in this old home, this old living room where her own childhood had passed. He belonged here.

Here he would grow up. She would mother him as she mothered her brother, teaching him all strong, noble ways. So that he might grow tall and bonny with a laugh on his lips and a fine, high purpose in his thought.

She would teach him to go gallantly with shoulders squared

—dauntless though his mother only stole him here! Because he was here, he would do it!

She glanced at the tiny chap who had scrambled from Mark's arms and now kept running to the fire, putting out his hands and calling, exultantly, "Hot! Hot!" backing away and rushing up to repeat, warningly, "Hot! Hot!"

There was no stain on this little bright spirit—no shadow on his heart.

She caught him up, and whispering the funny rhymes that he loved carried him off to bed. Put him in Jackie's room—summoning an old resilient gaiety—an old stalwart valiance to protect him.

She kneeled and murmured whimsically: "The bow-wow is asleep; the meow is asleep; the baby must sleep."

He mimicked her shaking his finger close to his eyes with a stealthy: "SHSH!" And almost in a moment curled up contentedly, the guilty fingers in his mouth.

Roen leaned over him. Here, often she had carried her little brother; here, she had brought Evelyn's baby. Here, at last, was her own.

She went to Mark and with a flash of vital sweetness took his face in her hands. Gazing into his gaunt eyes she said: "Go and look at him sleeping. How can we be sad?"

CHAPTER XXXVII

But when Mark looked at the child he saw only this—the brutal wrong to his own son that he must now permit to be branded or disowned.

They could not proclaim him theirs, thus branding him permanently. So they must deny him. And they could then never openly reclaim him—neither he nor Roen.

At fourteen months they would take from him both father and mother. He saw the child's whole life marred.

He said to Roen starkly, "The responsibility is mine. I can't refuse it. Roen, I can't let this be done to him."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't let the boy pay."

"It is too late to speak of it. He must pay. But I will make life worth the price to him. Make him glad and careless of the price."

"How, Roen? How? You will tell the world you have adopted him. You say there can be no stigma to this. But the child will wonder why his mother is not married, yet why his name is the same as hers.

"And suppose for all your caution the nurse or the doctor comes here and meets you and reveals the lie?"

Roen winced. "That chance is so remote."

"But it is possible. Coincidences are vicious and happen far more often than we like to think. Suppose this nurse en-

countered you and learned you are denying your son. That you are not Mrs. Robert Jackson, but Roen Ross, and claiming the child she knows you bore, to be adopted? What havoc there might be . . ."

"No matter what I do, Mark, there will be bitter chances."

"And if any legal complication arises," he went on, dumb and ruthless, "where are your adoption papers? Where is the child's birth certificate?"

She leaned forward, her eyes wide and accusing: "Why are you saying these things? Why would you fill me with dread? Ah—I can be filled with dread—now—for him—but why should you do this. No one of these things may ever happen."

"And all might! Roen, I've thought until I'm almost crazy. I don't seek my own happiness. All hope of this is long past. And no matter what path I now take I am hurting and killing. I don't know why this should be—why things have walled about us so. If I let you go on in this way, your child will never know a father. As he grows older this may be a terrible wound to him. By some chance the real story of his birth may be told. You do not know how he would accept this.

"His life is new. No matter who suffers, he should be protected because more than all others he is defenseless.

"Roen, I am going to get free. You must agree to this."

She repeated after him, somberly: "You are going to get free?"

"There is nothing else for me to do. In all the wrong I do —this will be least wrong."

She leaned over and touched his shoulder: "You will get free from Claire now? When she is blind? When she has no

one—not even a mother now? You will get free from her?"

He said hoarsely and pushing his chair so that Roen's hand could not touch his shoulder: "I will provide for her. She will be cared for."

He slumped into a long, agonized silence. Claire would be cared for! As when he went away! He saw her little hands slapped. He heard her so roughly scolded—felt her fling against him, sobbing. He could provide for her!

He would go home tonight and tell her this as she sat with her hands clasped on his knees—his frail, appealing child who leaned on him and needed him and told him with such happy trust that his eyes were kind as God's.

He would tell Claire that he was leaving her. He would get a nurse to care for her. And because she was so proud and in a way very brave, she would keep on smiling. She would ask as a child might: "Oh, are you going to leave me, Mark? Must you?"

If Mark did this thing he would never raise his head again. He would be lowered eternally. This would be sin, because it would be death to all that was fine and strong and tender in his being. This would be dooming shame.

All this Roen saw as Mark, too, had seen it.

She now said huskily and moving from him, for he would not look at her, "You would get free from her and we would be married? Oh, Mark—what a shame! We could never look in each other's eyes again. We would grow to hate each other with the memory of cowardice—of incalculable cruelty between us. Mark, you could not do this!"

He answered hoarsely: "We have lost the right to think of

ourselves. The child has a right to protection, though I suffer and you suffer in gaining it for him. You cannot sacrifice your son for Claire."

She now smiled and coming back to his chair asked softly: "Do you think you could protect my son by such a deed as this? If he proves to be my son and some day learned of this he would hate you; he would turn from you with the contempt you would deserve.

"If my son could prove so paltry, Mark, that he would ask safety at the cost of honor; safety bought with his father's shame, he is not worth protecting!

"There is no stain on him now. When he is a man he will know this. I will not be bowed when he learns the truth.

"But by this he would be infamously soiled; he would be dragged indelibly in sin. Well—you shall not do it!

"There are worse things in life than censure, Mark. There is a violence to the spirit. From this, at least, I can save him."

He sat with his hands clenched between his knees, wrestling with a frightful issue.

He glanced at Roen as she stood with her head flung back, her face rich with pride and strength and the brooding shadow of an infinite love. He spoke haltingly as though his words came over raw wounds.

"When he is a man he will understand. There are the years of childhood and the hard years of adolescence. I think of these, Roen. I know what these can mean. He will be wondering; he will be questioning; he will grow suspicious, guessing about his birth—his father—his mother. Because he will not have the facts, he may imagine them ugly. You do not

know how vicious may be the effect of this uncertainty. In the unstable years before he is adjusted and can take a man's viewpoint."

She leaned against the mantel assaulted by all these things he was saying: things she had thought of on many a racking night: things she had brushed aside with a pathetic: "Years before this problem arises! Joyous, carefree years. Meet the problem when it comes!"

She now said with her heart blazing: "I will tell him the truth. And make him see it as I have felt it! I will teach him to fight; to meet what is before him. Since there is no other way—no kinder way. . . ."

"Ah, Roen—but there is a kinder way—for him—"

He got up and came to her. He took her hands. Suddenly he put his arms about her. His arms were rigid and his hands icy.

"Roen, there is another way. You won't take me? You say I can't protect him? But you can. I would pay any price —gladly. For his life is new—is just beginning. It has a right above mine—above yours—above all other rights—

"Roen—look down the years. What do you see there for your son with you, nameless? And with the almost inevitable chance of discovery. . . ."

She pushed out her hands, pushed against him. All through her, a fire poured—liquid fire pouring through her veins. Looking into his smouldering eyes, she said, harsh, frantic:

"What do you mean? Good God—is this you, Mark! What are you saying?"

She wondered that the human tongue dare utter words so

blasphemous; words uttered simply like other human sounds; words that struck into her mind like demons stamping out its light.

"Roen, give the boy to me. Let me do what should be done —all that in your soul you want done."

She stood with her hands pushing against him—stood tall and flaming, her eyes wide, scorched, unbelieving. Give up her child? Had he said this? Was it possible this word was said?

She suddenly felt the baby in her arms, head buried so dearly that he might suck his fingers hiding against her throat. She folded her arms swiftly against her breasts.

She said dazed: "You want me to give up the baby, Mark? Give up my child? You say this is a way to save him. Mark, are you mad?"

She felt the baby torn from her and hugged her arms more tightly about her breasts. She listened to him, dazed, horrified, protesting.

And she wondered why he stood there so motionless with his head lowered; wondered why his voice was strained and hoarse.

"He is our son, Roen . . . a sacred trust. He is yours. Nothing can take him from you. . . . I, least of any. Would I, Roen? Would I take him except to serve him?

"Roen, what can you give him that I cannot also give him? Only your guidance. But he will have this. He will never forfeit this.

"Will you keep him then when you can give him nothing that can not be as freely given though he have his own name and a free, clear road ahead?

"Roen, I wouldn't part you. He will still be yours. You

can teach him—you can watch over him—see his life unfold.

"Unfold happily—freely, with no taint—no chance for the warping of his life. I will adopt him. When he is old enough —he shall know. . . .

"Roen, would you not want this for him? Will he not be safe with me? Will I not follow out all your wishes? Will I not make sure that he grows up strong and proud as you want him? Roen—speak—"

She said with her hands clasped tight against her lips: "Go— Go—"

And when he came to her and would have folded her in his arms—when he said: "Roen, because you are you, do you not see it the right way—the kinder way?"

She flung out her hands as a person does who is dying. She said blindly: "Go! Oh—go!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

She stood rigid with her eyes closed and her heart freezing against him.

He knew this. Gripping her hands he murmured incoherently: "Do I want to do this? Roen, do I want to take the baby from you? Except that we two together shall honor the love that has been between us. Together we do the best for our own little child?"—she felt the baby with his small palms patting her cheeks; felt him lifted from her; felt her own arms yielding him up. She swayed and with an inarticulate: "No —I cannot—God, no!" pitched against him.

* * * * * * *

Now she sat before the dying embers—alone—Mark gone—shadows thronging on the wall over there behind the chair.

Sat with her head thrown back, holding her thought in a vise. Let it not recall! Let it not bring back his words!

They came.

"Roen, give the boy to me."

"God, no!"

"To serve him. To honor him."

"God, no!"

"To give him his name To make his path free and glad. Roen, you can forget yourself. You always have. For him—your little child."

She sank low in the chair and again fought against thought

—fought against the feel of her baby in her arms and the warm, impulsive hands tightening about her neck. For with the feel of these she cried out into the preposterous dark—cried out to the torturing shadows: "No—no—NO!"

"Look down the years, Roen—what do you see there for your son with you, nameless? And in the stormy years of adolescence when he asks about his birth, his father, will your love compensate for uncertainty; for the handicap of his position; for possible and blasting shame? Look down the years, Roen—"

She got up and went stumbling down the hall. She felt her way into Jackie's room. And there looked down into the baby's crib. Oh, give up this living, adored and priceless treasure?

Would she thus serve him? Make his way proud and free?

Could she be sure of this?

Did he not need her who was his mother and who would give up life for him? Did he not need her love, her aching, all-abounding love?

Who could make this up to him?

She knelt that she might feel his breath on her face. She put his little hand on her cheek. And she thought of her love following him, blind and undisciplined down the years.

Would he not want this love? Would he not imperiously hunger for it?

If the child could know, what would his answer be? To stay with Roen because she loved him so—needed him so and had all these years so passionately awaited him?

Or would he go to his father who would also love him, and to blind Claire who would regard him as a gift from a dear,

recompensing God and would take him with adoration to her heart. Go to his father, where he would be acknowledged; where he would be safeguarded; where the possibility of wound or stain was far removed?

Which would the child ask? Which would best serve for her little boy?

Roen sank her lips in the warm, soft palm. She whispered against it, "Oh, you would go to him? Oh, baby, you would go to him?"

She knelt there, bowed against the baby's pillow. Thought swept over her. She did not resist it now.

All that Mark said. All the promises and safeguards that would sacredly be kept.

He would get the nurse Ulla, whom Roen trusted because she had a beautiful, understanding spirit; because she had a joyous way and knew the reverence due a little child. He would get Ulla; he would follow to the last, heart-breaking letter every guidance Roen gave.

And after awhile—ah, yes, after her own baby would forget she was his mother, then she could see him.

She must let him forget her, first. Thus she would serve him; thus she would insure his future. In six months or a year—oh, in less time than this, perhaps, a baby 14 months would utterly forget poor Roen Ross. . . .

And when they were assured of this, Ulla would bring the baby to visit her. They could in many ways arrange this.

Afterward if Roen would, she could be her baby's teacher —ah, make sure the child was guided right. Years might pass so. This would be Roen's meed.

She had her cheek resting against the child's. He now

stirred. Then he cried out. She lifted him and carried him to her own bed. And all night she lay with the child in her arms.

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He awakened and, feeling her, put out his hand and said in slow, uncertain syllables—in syllables that went thrilling and piercing to her deepest spirit: "Ma-ma—ma-ma."

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The next evening Mark came. She could not look at him. She sat with her hands pressed violently palm to palm. She said, stilly: "How would you explain?"

"That I knew of this child whose father was killed before it was born. That now, the mother because of the shock and the necessity of earning before she was able has gone into a decline. That she is forced to give her child up or see it deprived. That she feels her end not far distant and wants to make sure the child is protected. Whatever I tell, she will believe. Roen, she will adore—"

"Oh, do not—do not—"

He sank on his knees and hid his face against her hands.

* * * * * * *

The next day: "Have you told Claire? What did she say?"

"She wept—"

"Ah—one would. And Ulla? Have you found her?"

"She would come—"

After this Roen took the child each night into her bed. The little fellow, knowing this was a forbidden joy, snuggled against her, drawing the sheet half over his face, shaking his finger and warning: "SHSHSH!"

Then Roen thought: "I am mad! I'll never do this! Never!"

And when she dressed the child, when they played together and he would come stealing behind her and crouching down, shout in her ear: "Ba!" she would seize him in her arms blinking and biting her lips.

The baby thought these were lovely, funny faces. Poking his elfin face near to hers, he tried with uproarious contortions of mouth and eyes to imitate her. He thrust his fingers in her lips and once, suddenly, pressed his round, open mouth on hers.

She sobbed then. She folded him to her and sobbed.

* * * * * * *

Mark brought her papers to sign. She was Mrs. Robert Jackson and she gave up her child to be adopted by Mark Conrad, who now claimed the boy as his son.

There was another secret paper to be revealed only in the event that Mark died and Claire died—then the child was to be given to Roen Ross, who would be his guardian.

And in a third paper to be held in trust and read by no one but his son in the event that Mark died before the boy reached his majority—in this paper was the truth as to the real mother and the real father.

Roen held the pen a long while. . . . When she wrote the name the letters sprawled together. She clasped her hand over the signature—remaining so—lifeless.

"When, Roen?"

She could not answer.

CHAPTER XXXIX

Each morning Roen awakened to a ghostly voice demanding: "When?"

She looked from the window into the blustery March rain and murmured to it, challenging: "Not today!"

She took a shelf from the closet and set it on the floor in a little incline so that the baby could run up and down and laugh hilariously with this adventure.

And now she watched him in his new trick of whirling about till he became dizzy and plopped to the floor with a big, startled grin.

Not today would she yield him. Not tomorrow. Never!

Is it better? Really better? Your boy growing up will be better without your wild, unreckoning love?

She lay with her face down on her bed that had become a rack. And night after night she was stretched in anguish. Night after night the living cords of her mind and heart were drawn and drawn until she cried out to God: "Let be!" Cried out and nestling her arm about the child hid her face against him.

Now it was the last day of March. And now the first of April. Roen stood in the dim passage, leaning heavily against the wall.

Jackie was coming. In two days.

She folded the telegram in her two hands and pressed her hands against her lips.

The time was up. Her time with her baby was up. If she would save him—ah, if this, then, was the way to save him—

She stood here and leaned against the wall and felt the life and the thought and the throb of her pulse ebb from her, her pain too great for even God to soothe.

She went about the house and packed the baby's things. She sent all these to Mark.

They would be put in the nursery on that third floor he had got ready for his son. Oh—a great room with a roof garden where the sun beamed all day long and where there were flowers and all manner of bright, lightsome things to make glad a little boy of fourteen months and the sweet, blind woman who would often sit with him; the blind girl who would laugh in joy when he patted her cheek or pulled at her big, dark glasses. She would laugh and thank a dear, gracious God who had taken her eyes but in his lordly return had given this lovely child.

Here Roen's baby would grow up. Here he would romp and shout.

And he would not miss her. The loss was hers—the pain was hers. All of it.

The last day. Dressing him—playing with him—feeding him, she fell into long, inert pauses: a stricken emptiness of thought.

Now and then she caught him to her, holding him, whispering brokenly against his ear.

And the baby, perhaps because he was tired or it might be

that he was the lovable angel Roen thought him, squeezed her face hard in his small palms, looked at her and said softly: "Mama."

She thought aghast: "He will never do this again!" And she held him fast—her little child that in a few hours she would give away—that her own arms would yield up.

She pressed his small hands against her face, against her throat, against her mind and heart. They would be pressed there always—living and warm and little.

All her life and all her being were in this little boy. All her life and all her being would go out when he was taken.

She sang to him softly; sang to him tenderly.

Some day, perhaps, he would claim her. A proud, tall lad —another Jackie, he would come and put fine sensitive hands, like his father's, on her shoulders. He would look in her sorrowing eyes and laugh softly and perhaps say, yearning: "Mother—" and be glad and feel she had been brave—oh, very brave.

But the baby now snuggled on her breast, she would never know again. He was asleep. He would awaken in another's arms. She laid him on her bed.

Now it was seven o'clock. Now it was nearing 8. She sat in the living room.

No fire. No shadows. All quiet.

Now it was 8. She said aloud: "It is 8." And, getting up, she went to her room and took a blanket and wrapped her baby in it.

She stooped over him and traced softly his long, silky brows; she pressed her lips lightly on his closed eyes. She laid her cheek a moment on his.

Then "when her soul was departing for pain and death was now at hand"—the death of her heart and of all joy and of all peace, she lifted him gently in her arms—she went down the hallway of the home where for her so many things had died.

She went out in the darkness of that April night and carried her little, sleeping baby with her.

A wind blew. The eucalyptus trees bowed their long, graceful branches. And the night swept about her, murmuring —seeking.

She hurried. She crossed into the park. He came toward her. She hurried past, holding the baby closer.

He opened the door of the car and pointed to the long basket made up like a bed.

Roen stepped in. She laid the baby down. Softly she drew the covers over him. And for a last, swift moment gazed in the dear, tanned face. She closed her eyes.

Mark had an arm about her. Mark's voice: "Only for a little while. You give him up that he may find himself for life. Oh, Roen, beloved—"

She gazed at him, unhearing. She backed from him, mute—blanched—unsmiling.

She waved him on, waved him majestically.

And stood there, quiet, watching him go. Suddenly she looked down at her arms—her empty arms—and said, bewildered: "I gave him away."

She looked distractedly into the thronging dark and began to run.

She stopped and whispered, stark, cowering, bewildered: "I gave him away!" She felt the baby in her arms, his face

buried in her throat. She went plunging—on—on. Now and then she stopped and, seizing hold of a tree, said to it:

"I gave my baby away."

Her knees grew weak. But she couldn't stop. Once she asked:

"What will I do now?"

And once, after a long while, when she had raced on and on, she stopped abruptly.

She saw Mark lifting her baby warm from his sleep . . . the blond head cuddled against his own. Carrying him up the steps of his home. Ulla and Claire waiting in that nursery—quiet—not wishing to disturb him. Saw Claire coming with her poor arms outstretched. Saw her leaning delicately over Mark's shoulder.

The baby would awaken—would smile. He always did. Perhaps would reach to Claire.

What would Mark do then, after he gave Roen's baby into Claire's arms?

Roen gripped the branches of the tree. She cried to it, protesting: "Oh, God—God—"

Now she was at the beach—looking to the waters—walking to them—rushing. The waves came over her ankles. They came to her knees. She watched them in a desperate quiet—walking out to meet the waters.

Presently she halted. She told herself: "Don't do this. I can't die!"

That would be deserting him—leaving the world into which she had brought a child.

* * * * * * *

A light wavered on the waves—a long shaft of light. She

sank on the sands. In a terrible weariness—watching that light—praying to it.

Her thought trailed out and was lost in that wavering light. Now the light came nearer. It was no longer the moon playing on the ocean. It was sunlight, and the humming-birds were darting in the roses: golden radiance of that Sunday when her child had stirred within her—her dear and longed for child.

The garden was all bathed in the light of her joy—eternally bathed in this light. Now the gate was opening. A voice called. They were coming to her in radiance. Mark and the little boy.

The child ran swiftly. The child called, and reaching up, pulled her down. The child said gaily: "Mother—" and he laughed and knew her though the years had passed.

And Mark said: "Roen, dearest—we have come. You see us. Oh, beloved—you chose the best. Speak, Roen, was it not the best?"

Living, their arms were about her. Warm, their lips touched her face.

Awed, Roen opened her eyes. Frightened she sprang to her feet. She felt them near—speaking—touching.

She raised her head and gazed fixedly at the moonlight dim on the distant waters. She said sobbing: "Oh, God—did you show me that? God—that was not a dream!"

For a long while she stood with her hands clasped, a strange, wild fervor in her heart. The dream was true. He was hers—that little child. She had not lost him.

She had only yielded up her life that his might be strong and gay and sweet.

Had only lost herself for him. This was to find herself—strong, generous, maternal—eternal mother forgetting herself even to the death that her little child might laugh—flinging away her soul for love.

And love would bring it back to her.

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